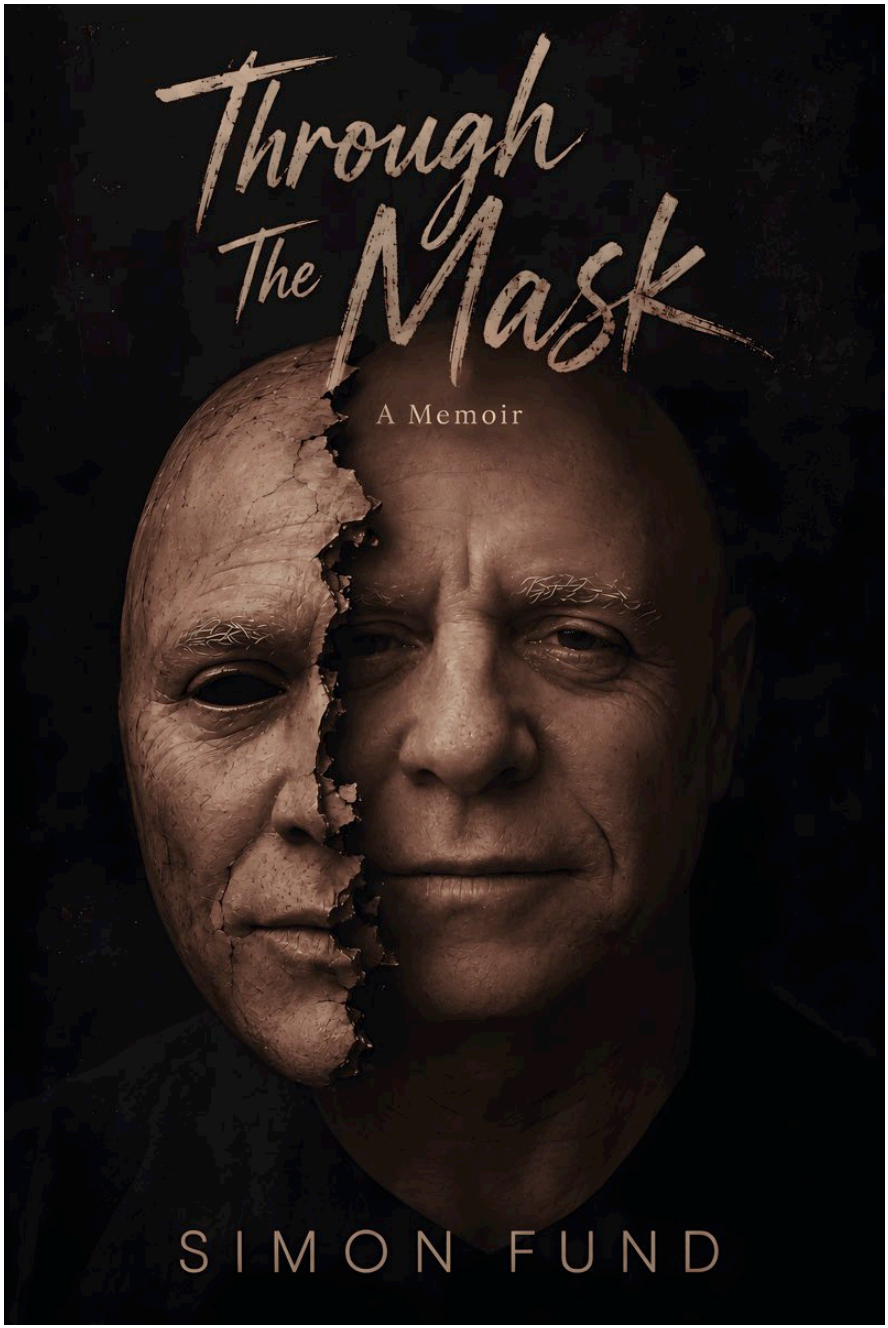
Through The Mask
A Memoir
SIMON FUND

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Introduction

Peter arrived just as the previous finance manager left. It was his first time in the motor trade. I liked him immediately: he was a shrewd operator and a quick learner, and he loved money. This was the 1980s, when 'greed was good', and he wasn't too concerned about how he acquired it.

The showroom sold the same make of car as its two sister branches, which could often make sales difficult. Customers would sometimes be tempted into playing us against each other, going back and forth until we were forced to give away our entire commission just to close the deal. When the managers finally met to discuss the issue, they concluded that the way to increase their profits was to reduce the commission they paid the salesmen. Unsurprisingly, the salesmen weren't happy with this, and when I spoke up on our behalf, all I got back was: "If you don't like it, you know what you can do."

After earning one-third less for a few weeks—perhaps because we'd accepted it a bit too easily, or maybe it had been their plan all along—they dropped the rate again. As my income relied solely on commission, I was now taking home half of what I'd previously made, through no fault of my own. It really pissed me off.

It was clearly time to find somewhere else to work, but I knew I'd just stay in the trade, and while I had enough experience to pull this off, something about this didn't feel right. I wanted to change my life; I just didn't know how to go about it.

As far as the dealership was concerned, salesmen were easy to replace. There were plenty of people willing to explore a commission-only job in the trade. Selling cars was never about feeling

good about the work, being part of a successful team, or creating loyalty within a company that valued its employees; it was all about the money.

I understood the logic of bringing in people who had no idea the commission had just been lowered—people who were simply happy to be selling cars. Most were pretty average anyway, and staff turnover was high; it wasn't easy making money if you didn't have what it took.

As I weighed up my options, a different kind of plan began to emerge. When I told Peter what I was thinking, he became excited and wanted to be part of it. While I could tell he was already counting the money he could see coming his way, I was imagining what the real outcome would be. This wasn't about getting away with it—it was about the transformative effect of the experience itself. I knew my life would change no matter what.

After removing one of the cheques the company received for an accident repair claim, I paid it into the wrong account. Then it suddenly dawned on me that if I swapped these cheques for the cash some customers used to settle their balance with, I wouldn't just be messing up the accounts—I'd be putting thousands of pounds into my pocket at the same time. Unfortunately, it wasn't common for anyone to pay their balance this way, and I'd have to ensure I got to the money before it went into the safe.

I decided a better solution was needed, and that's when I discovered a man advertising in our local paper. While his part resulted in 30% coming off the top, it made the money coming in increase so much that I felt free from the need to earn it.

I found myself sitting at my desk just going through the motions, unconcerned whether someone bought a car or not; I then started selling not only more than I'd ever done, but more than the top sellers in the showroom. That September, following the annual rush of new August registrations, I smashed the monthly record across all three branches, earning £10,800 before tax—roughly £32,600 in today's money.

Having so much cash seemed to cry out to be spent. Even though I wore a nice watch, I popped into a jeweller's on my way to work one morning, put £2,600 on the counter and acquired a £3,200 Rolex. To complete the set, when I saw an 18k gold and diamond ring, also by Rolex, I added that too, for a mere £850 more. I immediately went through a number of experiences where those who saw me wearing the watch thought it was simply fake. I never corrected them. The irony about having this status symbol wasn't lost on me.

One year later

The auditors arrived on my day off. Peter called me immediately. He'd managed to remove the logbooks for both our company cars with the idea that we would sell them to a trader to give us a decent bit of cash to make a run for it. When I told him I intended to face whatever was about to happen, he went quiet. He wasn't expecting this. Once he understood I was serious, he had no real option but to do the same.

The next day, the general manager called me into his office just after lunch. Two fraud-squad officers were with him, and they arrested me the moment I walked in. No questions were asked. No accusations were made. In fact, no words were said other than to reveal why I was being arrested and what my rights were. I was expecting this would happen, but experiencing it still came as a shock.

Walking down the spiral staircase—one detective in front, the other behind—my co-workers, having no idea what was going on, simply stared. We stopped by my desk, which they looked through briefly, and then went out to my company car, where I was asked to remove any personal items. I already had.

As I climbed into the back of their car, I found myself responding to a remark from one of the detectives. He was trying to get a sense of who I was, and I replied without thinking—my words

sounded cocky. I saw his eyes light up. It made me think of a cat playing with a mouse, letting it believe it might still slip away. I didn't say another word.

At the front desk of the police station, my rights were read to me again. When the desk-sergeant asked if I wanted a solicitor, I told him no.

He wrote down my details, putting my few things into a clear plastic bag. When he picked up the watch, he looked at it closely, turning it over in his hands and feeling its weight, before shrugging and putting it in with the rest.

The cell was very warm. It had a small window, a narrow bunk with a plastic-covered mattress, and a lidless, stainless-steel toilet. There was no paper.

In the business card pocket of my suit jacket was a small piece of cannabis resin called hash. I wasn't searched, though it might have been missed anyway. I was a regular user by this point: smoking at work with the mechanics out the back, even with the sales manager in his office before going home. I always had some on me, ready to roll a joint whenever the opportunity arose. I could've flushed it, but knowing I'd likely be in the cell for some time, I decided to dispose of it internally and swallowed it whole.

The custody officer came in carrying a plate of beef stew, mashed potato, and cabbage. The rules state that a prisoner has to be fed at certain times. I didn't feel like eating, but I took it anyway, and as I did, memories of bland, primary school dinners requiring plenty of salt flooded back. I quickly asked for some just before he left, but the look he gave me definitely suggested the food didn't require it.

When he returned to collect the tray, the two detectives followed him in. They led me to a nearby interview room and switched on the recorder.

They wrote down every question they asked, noting 'no comment' beside each one to account for my silence. I didn't need to say the words; I simply sat quietly, letting nothing they said reflect

on my face. I was just there, watching it happen.

Without answers, the interview didn't take long. They said they'd be searching my home next and I'd be going with them. I actually felt relieved not to be going back to the cell.

It was dark outside and a little chilly. They sat in the front of their unmarked car talking casually as if I wasn't there—two work colleagues having a chat about that day's events. I settled into what would be a forty-minute drive, looking out the window at a view I'd driven past many times.

I found myself strangely enjoying the ride, as if I was just getting a lift home. Then the absurdity of the situation hit me, and all sense of enjoyment disappeared. Anxiety took over, forcing me to confront what was coming. I was right on the verge of talking, having to stop myself from instinctively leaping to my own defence. The urge to explain myself, to justify why I'd done this, was almost overwhelming—but I knew that opening my mouth would only make things harder for me.

One of the detectives started asking questions again, only this time, without the recorder running, his delivery was far more aggressive. His tone affected me so much that I somehow forgot I wasn't obliged to reply. I listened carefully to ensure I'd say the right thing, but this only heightened my anxiety. I felt certain that if I said a single word, I wouldn't stop talking. This scared me; I was losing control. I desperately wanted to retreat—to remain silent and observe from my safe, inner space, rather than fixating on a future I did not want while trying to avoid it.

My mind suddenly filled with images of prison and the certainty I'd soon be heading there. As I focused on his words, I realised I hadn't a clue what he was saying—he might as well have been speaking another language for all the sense it made to me. I had to release the pressure—I had to let go.

Just as it seemed like I was losing my mind, I remembered I didn't have to reply—and this let me stop caring about what he said. I cannot describe the relief this brought.

His questions kept coming, though, and his frustration must have been building, because he finally exclaimed, "Don't you know what will happen to you?"

It was only then that I felt like answering him. "Whatever will happen will happen," I stated flatly. He didn't say anything else.

I opened the front door and climbed the stairs. Micky, my housemate, came rushing out of the living room, having no idea what was going on. I told him the police were going to search the place, but one detective stepped in, stating they'd only be searching my room. They asked him to remain downstairs while the search took place.

I'd recently bought two ounces of hash. The trouble was, it had already been cut into eighths and individually bagged, as the mechanic had assumed I'd be selling it on. While I'd been pleased not to have to do this, it would now be construed as intent to supply—a more serious matter than the reason the police were there. Following Peter's call, I decided I'd better tape the package of sixteen little bags to the back of my bedside drawer.

The detective looked through the drawer's contents, then jiggled it to see if it would slide out; he glanced at me a few times, searching for something on my face that would justify him doing so. There was nothing I could do if he removed the drawer, but I didn't have to give him a reason by worrying about what would happen if he did. I'd replaced the screws that held it to the runner so he'd have to find a screwdriver. He looked at me one more time, shrugged, and moved on.

He went through my other suit, hanging on an open rail, and pulled out a stamped, addressed envelope. "Is this a letter to a cus-

tomer?" he asked. I said it was, and he tucked it back into the pocket—I was glad I'd sealed it; inside were three of the showroom's cheques, waiting to be posted.

He noticed a small, unlocked cash box by the side of my bed. I watched his eyes widen as he used a pen to flip open the lid. The money wasn't incriminating in itself; nothing can be inferred from having a box of cash by your bed.

"What's all this then?" he asked, sarcastically.

Without intending to say anything, but suddenly feeling more attached to it than I was expecting, I tried, half-heartedly, to hold onto what still felt like mine. "Savings," I said. I knew the moment I said it I was just trying not to lose it. I had no idea why I'd even left it out.

With an obvious air of satisfaction, he announced that a vital piece of evidence had now been found. The search ended. After all, who'd leave that much cash lying around if they were hiding something else? I now understood why it hadn't occurred to me to conceal it. Without it, he may have felt the need to go over where he'd already been, and perhaps this time find that screwdriver.

It was almost midnight by the time I was back in the cell. Exhausted and glad to be alone again, I lay on the bunk and fell asleep.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself in a prison cell—I'd been there three years. All my friends and family had forgotten me; I felt completely alone. As I lay there feeling devastated by this, I woke up. I was caught between the feeling of the dream and the reality of the situation, and my body started to shake just as the night officer looked through the observation hatch on his duty check. He came in, decided I needed help, and went to call a doctor.

The doctor arrived quickly, even though it was the early hours of the morning. He said I was in shock and gave me two tranquillis-

ers. They left me alone after this.

As I lay there gathering myself, an idea suddenly took hold. I practically ran to the cell door and called out through the now-open hatch that I wished to speak to a solicitor. The night officer didn't even bother looking up from his newspaper; he told me flatly that everyone was in bed, it was far too late, and I should have asked for one earlier. I stepped away from the door, feeling somewhat deflated, but the idea felt right, so I called out again—more insistently—that I wanted to see or at least speak to one now.

A few minutes later, I was talking to the duty solicitor by phone. I told him how long I'd been held, why I'd been arrested, and that I hadn't been charged. As I did this, the lead detective turned up looking like he'd just got out of bed; he caught the end of my conversation, made it clear he didn't like being manipulated, and accused me of planning this all along. I had no idea what he was on about. I just wanted to go home.

I handed him the phone so the solicitor could talk to him. Once he was finished, he looked at me for a long moment, then asked if I'd like a cab. I wasn't sure I'd heard him correctly, as this was such an unexpected question. I didn't have a car anymore so I said I did, and after he made the call himself, he told me to get out.

I was expecting some time would pass before they'd be ready to charge me, but I never heard anything more from them. Perhaps my ex-employer decided that pressing charges wasn't worth the risk of what might come out in court, preferring to keep their own dodgy practices in the shadows.

The showroom took on a new franchise not long after. Nobody lost their job; they simply hoisted a new sign, replaced the stock, and instantly did away with the ridiculous competition.

The feeling of getting away with it was a powerful one. I'd done my best not to let fear change things, which had resulted in something unexpected occurring. So, when Peter suggested we do it again somewhere else, a strange sensation came over me. To all appearances, nothing had really changed—I'd lost my job, but I'd

given up on that the moment I started taking their money. I was still very much the same person, perhaps even more so. Should I do it again? Would I keep getting away with it? The thought was intriguing, and it wasn't long before I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

Autumn, 1989

Visiting an upmarket showroom posing as customers looking for a quote, I took the headed paper the quote came on and photocopied it while covering the text. I bought a rub-on letter transfer kit and painstakingly mocked up an official-looking document authorising the collection of the dealer's post directly from the sorting office. It explained how an urgent document was needed before the post would normally arrive and a salesman would be sent round to pick it up.

On a cold, bright morning, we turned up at the sorting office. I handed over the letter confirming I had permission to collect the post on behalf of the dealership. The salesman's business card was shown as proof of identity, and without any questions being asked, the bag was handed over.

I even held the door open for a female member of staff on her way out for a smoke, exchanging a little banter as she went. Everything took place as if our visit had been perfectly innocent.

Five cheques were removed and the bag handed to one of Peter's associates waiting in a van to drop it off.

The cheques were posted to the man from the paper. We'd used him twice so far: arrangements were made by phone, cheques went by post, and the package of cash was collected by a motorcycle courier which I picked up from their depot. There was no CCTV back then, which kept the entire thing anonymous.

Peter was arrested two days later. It hadn't occurred to me to ask his mate how he intended to drop off the bag; since he'd already been paid, he likely just opened the showroom door and

slung it in. After arousing suspicion, the salesman who'd dealt with us was eventually questioned by the police, where he promptly handed over the registration number of Peter's hire car.

Car salesmen believe that a customer becomes theirs from the moment they say hello. If someone is just looking but comes back and buys from another member of the team, the first salesman will receive the commission, so long as they can show they were the one who originally made contact. Because we left no details, while making it seem like the sale would be lucrative, the salesman would've been keen to watch for our return. Peter didn't park outside—nowhere near—but we did drive past a few minutes later, which had been enough for him to spot the plate.

Even with this circumstantial piece of evidence, nothing linked Peter's car with any crime, and nothing linked me with Peter's car. But when they picked him up, he panicked and mentioned my name.

He called me just after he was bailed and apologised for dropping me in it. I was just glad he'd let me know. What was done was done, but as I'd just paid for a two-week holiday with my girlfriend and was due to fly out in a few days, I decided to keep out of their way and went to stay with a friend. I didn't mention any of this to my girlfriend, but I was definitely on edge going through passport control.

After the holiday, I made no further attempt to hide. I stayed in, mostly, just knowing that at some point I would be arrested again.

Waiting for the knock at the door made me feel like a fugitive, even though I was sitting in my own front room. With no way of knowing when they'd turn up, I could only live life one day at a time. It forced me to wonder, every morning, if this would be the day. Eventually, it took on such a sense of inevitability that any idea of having a future simply vanished. There was only the present, and it became precious, because I knew that at any moment, life as I knew it would change. Three months went by like this.

Finally, when Micky left one morning, two detectives were waiting outside. I'd just woken up and was on my way down for a pee. They arrested me before I made it to the loo.

My solicitor told me I was going to be charged. He asked if I'd need him to stay as he had an urgent case to get to otherwise. Charging me was just the next step in the process; I saw little reason for him to be there.

A detective I hadn't met before led me into a room directly behind the custody sergeant, which had already been set up with a camera and height board. After taking the pictures, he presented me with what appeared to be a blank piece of paper and told me to sign it. Feeling a surge of self-importance, followed by the suspicion that I was being set up, I insisted on reading it. He told me not to cause trouble, grabbed the front of my shirt, and hauled me toward the desk. What should have been little more than a formality —standard procedure that didn't require anyone to help me—had now become something else. I suddenly felt like a child who'd only been playing at being a grown-up and was now, unexpectedly, being treated like one.

I couldn't process what was happening and just stood there staring at the paper. Despite looking directly at it and appearing to take it in, I couldn't make sense of anything.

Without warning, the detective grabbed me by the throat and shoved me hard against the wall. Spit flew from his mouth as rage took over. I could feel his nails digging into my neck.

A tingling sensation rippled through my body from the top of my head right down to my feet. It disconnected me from everything that was happening. I was just there, observing, as if none of this was happening to me.

Then a memory appeared.

When I was a kid, I'd sometimes go through *episodes*—day-

dream-like experiences accompanied by a high-pitched buzzing and a feeling of no longer being part of what was going on. One of them had left me with the sense that I'd know when I was about to die. It was a bizarre experience, but it felt as though that time had come. A second tingling washed through me, sharper than the first, seemingly confirming it.

The shouting eventually ceased and it became quiet. I still wasn't breathing, but I was able to make a sound from the back of my throat. Moments later, I noticed a flicker in his eyes—barely there, but enough to tell me the noise had done its job. Whatever had taken hold of him, whatever had triggered his rage, finally began to lose its grip. I watched as the mist lifted and he realised exactly what he was doing.

He released me, stumbling back and steadying himself against the table, the colour having drained from his face. As I sat down on the chair next to me, another memory appeared—reminding me of a choice I'd made a long time ago.

Doubting him had opened me to something I simply wasn't prepared for; it let in what my previous state of acceptance had kept out. But I saw more than this. I saw beyond this. From long before I ever was this, life moving me toward becoming who I truly am.

This took no more than a few seconds, but the moment I understood that the experience was meant to wake me up, to remember, and this man had been the instrument of that, I felt deeply humbled. I looked up and our eyes met, and before anything else could occur, I apologised; understanding and accepting in one go.

He looked at me for several seconds, then asked if I'd sign the paper now. I got up and did so without reading it. He took me outside and, after covering my fingertips with ink, pressed each one onto the paper I'd signed. He was calm and gentle but didn't say another word.

When I saw my solicitor I did mention what had happened; the marks on my neck were clearly visible. I had no intention of doing anything about it though, I just thought he ought to know.

Recognising how significant the experience was, I could not then seek retribution as if wrong was all it had been. He had no right to lay his hands on me, but what had come from it felt real in a way I wasn't yet ready to understand. I just knew something was different. Something had changed.

Part One

Removing The Mask

Chapter 1

Before

THE RULES that Jews are expected to follow didn't exist in our house. Even though we lived a secular lifestyle, I went to an orthodox Jewish primary school. My mother said this was important.

I was soon struggling with the religious ideas I was expected to follow there, particularly when it came to what I ate. I couldn't understand why I had to abide by a different set of rules at school to those I did at home. They weren't my ideas, my beliefs; they were just thoughts I was being told to think.

Because not eating kosher is considered a sin, I lied about what I ate whenever the topic came up—especially when it came to the sweets that weren't kosher, or were no longer kosher, which only made things even more confusing and nonsensical. This forced me into constructing a persona to avoid being seen as different. The need to remain undiscovered felt important, particularly as everyone else appeared to be following the rules perfectly.

But my biggest issue was having to learn things I wasn't interested in. I'd disrupt some of those classes, especially if they involved learning about the Old Testament. I was eventually put into a class for those they deemed too difficult to teach. I had no idea this group even existed. It wasn't a bad solution, as it gave me a place to be creative and to be around other neurologically different kids.

As Jews, we were told we were special—God's chosen people. This gave the impression that we were better than the gentiles, rather than being held to a higher standard, which is how it's supposed to be understood.

During the lunch break, we'd usually see a few of the state secondary boys walking back after having gone home for lunch. With bravado raised behind securely locked gates, we'd taunt them and often throw stones. The teachers ensured we were afraid of these 'others' by withholding contrasting or unbiased ideas. I was expected to just accept whatever they said, so I rejected everything instead—even though some of it didn't need to be.

When it was time for secondary school, because I wasn't offered a place at the 'good Jewish school' my Mum tried to get me into, I was left with no alternative but to join the very school I'd grown up being afraid of.

I decided to keep my Jewish identity hidden, as the antisemitic comments I heard—almost from the very first moment—were deeply unsettling. Not only had I lost the feeling of safety I'd taken for granted, but the sense of hatred seemed palpable. I didn't think I looked particularly Jewish and hoped to escape notice by keeping my head down, but it wasn't long before certain phrases made it clear it hadn't worked.

I discovered that one of the teachers—Hilary Bash—was Jewish; she taught English and looked out for me whenever she saw me. But I wasn't in her class, so our paths rarely crossed. In contrast, there were teachers who actively encouraged the racist views some kids came in with.

Primary school would rank everyone each time a report was given out. This was intended to motivate, and it likely did for those near the top, but I was in the mid-twenties out of a class of thirty-five, which just left me feeling insignificant. During my first year at secondary school, however, I found the standard was below me. For a while—at least until I knew better—I enjoyed being near the top of the class.

The biggest problem for me was the near-constant threat of violence, which seemed ready to explode from the simplest of circumstances. Accidentally bumping into anyone in the corridor or catching someone's heel while walking—in fact, doing anything that

caused a bystander to shout, “Shame!”—was enough to spark a major confrontation. Whether inside or out, those nearby quickly formed a jeering circle, eager to see a fight. Whenever violence came my way, I’d usually be able to talk or joke my way out of it. While this saved me many times, it also made it harder to be around those who were truly racist. They saw my quick wit as the “Jew acting superior”. They knew exactly how to put me down. I kept away from them as much as I could.

I made my way through the years and stayed on for the sixth form, which is when things got a lot better. The racists had gone. School uniforms were no longer required, and we were suddenly on first-name terms with the teachers. There was even a tuck shop and a common room to hang out in.

The tuck shop would eventually turn into a mini-bar in the evening—after the teachers had gone home, of course. This continued for several weeks until Christine Watts, the head of sixth form, walked in on us one evening. Momentarily distracted by one couple snogging by the window, she quickly realised the rest of us were ever so slightly sozzled. From then on, the tuck shop only ever sold crisps, chocolate, and soft drinks.

It was in the sixth form that I discovered Law. I completed what usually took two years in just one, passing with top marks. I was good at weighing up legal arguments and even took to attending my local crown court to watch the proceedings in my spare time.

I once stood as a witness for a friend in a minor traffic case—ironically, I was the one who should have been in the dock, as I’d been riding his motorbike when we were pulled over for going through a traffic light that had just changed to red on a fast stretch of road in the rain, while he was on the back—and I managed to say something that got him off, something he could never have done for me. I also got to do jury service where motive and self-de-

fence were the primary issues.

I spent a lot of time around the school's budding lawyers—the real high achievers, some of whom went on to study at Oxbridge.

Christine Watts made me deputy head student in my second year, giving me a metal badge so everyone could see I wasn't just a prefect anymore. I enjoyed receiving the honour, though I had no idea why she'd chosen me.

At eighteen, my parents divorced and my father left for good. He never wanted to spend any time with me, not unless he was badgered into it by Mum. I had no idea how to be around him. There were two things I did with him, and only very occasionally—fishing and metal-detecting.

I'd sit on the little folding stool, focusing intently on the slightly bobbing float, waiting for it to go under. He always set everything up; I always needed him to. I didn't really like fishing, as I hated the stink of fish on my hands or clothes, but I did enjoy catching. I just couldn't see the point since he never made a fire to cook anything. I would've liked that.

But it was metal-detecting that I really enjoyed. This was also about focusing, but this time it was about waiting for a signal—discovering I could intuit what might be hidden just by the tone it made. Finding something interesting or valuable was exciting; I loved it.

Metal-detecting, like fishing, was all part of Dad's alone time. Letting me join in, when he usually went solo, wasn't easy for him. Being on his own was how he coped with Mum. I'd sometimes hear her following him from room to room as he tried to escape, forcing him to hear whatever she had to say. He never seemed angry, but she was relentless—constantly bombarding him with her perspective.

He was a black-cab driver who spent hours in our tiny garage—

barely big enough to fit the taxi—repairing, maintaining, and even respraying panels when needed. Beyond that, he could turn his hand to almost anything: painting and decorating, carpentry, or electrical work. He could make whatever was needed, approaching every task with a sense of calm presence; he either knew how to make it or exactly how to fix it. It was impressive.

I was attending Harrow College when he left, and once I received my grant for the final year, I stopped going. My father's departure freed me from the sense that I had to continue. I'd just had enough of doing things that didn't interest me, even though I genuinely enjoyed the college experience. There was a pub on-site that sold cheap beer, which meant I could technically turn up to an afternoon class drunk. I never did, but I liked knowing the choice was mine to make.

I took a job installing rental TVs and VCRs. It came with a van that I could take home and use without having to pay for fuel, which felt like a massive perk. I even had a radio-cassette player fitted, cutting holes in the door panels for the speakers.

Initially, I was teamed up with Tony. For the first few weeks, while I learned the ropes, I sat with him in his van. It wasn't long before I discovered that he was a small-time drug dealer.

I'd seen people smoking cannabis at the parties I sometimes went along to, but I never hung around anyone who used it. My friends consumed copious amounts of alcohol—often to the point of puking—yet rejected anyone who tried anything else.

When I brought up the subject with Tony, he invited me back to his place after work to try it. I was finally going to find out why society insisted it was wrong, yet people clearly enjoyed. I couldn't wait.

I watched him roll a joint, light it and take a few puffs to get it going, then pass it to me. I breathed in, managing to do so without

coughing; not coughing felt important.

Tony wasn't interested in taking cannabis so early in the evening, so while I finished it, he emptied a little white powder onto a marble tile and snorted that, while his girlfriend, who'd just come in, did the same.

They asked if I'd be alright as I wobbled gently out the front door. I assured them I'd be fine, though I completely forgot to buy some. I just wanted to return to the safety of my van so I could be alone and process what I was experiencing.

I'd been drunk many times, but this didn't feel anything like that. The people I saw going about their lives, unaware of my presence, seemed connected to me in some inexplicable way. It felt as if my life had always been a kind of dream, with everyone potentially there for the purpose of my experience. It was a strange yet liberating experience. I sat in the van for ages before I felt ready to make my way home. I wouldn't get to use it again for nine years.

My next job took me into car sales. Earning a living through commission fundamentally changed the way I operated; there was an implied understanding that everyone was out for themselves. If you didn't sell, you didn't earn, and that reality took precedence over everything else.

I was taken on to sell new cars only, so I had to refer any inquiry I picked up for a used one. As a result, new-car sellers formed strategic alliances with those on the used-car side. We weren't just competing against each other; we were also navigating the internal politics of who was allied with whom.

The two experienced new-car salesmen did things differently. They'd been there for years, and the rules about what they could or couldn't sell didn't apply to them. Despite everyone working on commission, I found myself at their beck and call. They'd sometimes ask me to drive an unregistered car to a dealer in Birming-

ham or Manchester and exchange it for the specific model they'd just sold, then come straight back. I'd be out most of the day. They took home a lot of money and were frequently given bottles of alcohol or other gifts by their customers; I was in awe of them. While I liked being out of the office, and loved driving different cars—especially my brand-new company car—the reality was that I didn't sell much.

A senior salesman at the dealership's sister branch was about to retire, and before he went he let me in on a secret: If I offered a customer's finance proposal to an acquaintance of his who ran a finance company, and it was accepted, the entire commission would be paid to me instead of the dealer.

This would only work with the highest-rated customers, but if everything went through, by picking up the phone and reading out a few details, several hundred pounds went into my pocket.

One day, I was called into the manager's office; one of my petty fiddles had been discovered. To be honest, I can't even remember which one—and everyone was involved in something. Just like that, I was fired.

A week later I went for an interview at an upmarket showroom in Mayfair. They didn't just sell your average family vehicle; they specialised in custom-made, extremely expensive luxury cars, most of which were going to the Middle East.

I was the youngest and most inexperienced salesman they'd ever taken on. I wasn't expecting to get the job, but the manager offered it to me there and then.

If I thought I wasn't selling many cars before this, I sold even fewer now. To supplement my meagre income, I'd offer any part-exchange I took in to an independent trader rather than simply let it go to the dealership. By giving away most of the new car's profit—and therefore my commission—as an 'over-allowance' for the used

one, I made it seem like the customer was getting a lot more than their car was worth. The trader would then pay me far more than the official trade value the dealer would have assigned. By ensuring no used car appeared on the paperwork and making up the missing amount in cash after delivery, whatever was left was mine. Doing just one of these a month made a significant difference to my income.

I picked up a call from an elderly couple who were looking to trade in a car they'd owned from new. Rather than have them come into town, I went to their home with a car they could test-drive. They were a lovely couple, and their car was immaculate; they weren't asking much for it either. When I spoke to the trader, he offered me £800 more than the official trade value.

I'd just taken a day off when they called to ask if I could look for an earring they thought might have been left in the car. Had I been there, I'd have called the trader to see if he still had it, or simply told her I'd looked and found nothing. But because I was out, the manager got involved. When he dug through my paperwork to see where the part-exchange might be, he discovered why he couldn't find it.

The following day, both he and the area manager were already waiting for me. I couldn't tell whether they expected me to deny it, try and justify it, or fall apart at the prospect of being sacked. I just said, "Fair enough."

I was in the middle of creating invitations for an upcoming social event at the showroom. I asked the boss if he'd like me to finish them, as nobody else knew how to use the computer. Instead, he took me for a drink at an expensive wine bar, telling me he thought I'd taken my dismissal "like a man".

On the way home a friend called for a chat. I told her I'd just *left* my job, only to hear that where she worked in admin, they were looking for a salesman. I went round and started immediately.

On my first Saturday—their busiest day—I secured an unexpect-

ed, though much-appreciated reputation, by taking orders for three new cars. Knowing I'd worked in Mayfair brought me a certain kudos, but selling three cars on my first Saturday really confirmed it.

I discovered that most of the salesmen smoked cannabis, and would do so whenever they felt like it. Everything seemed possible here: smoking out the back in the workshop with the mechanics, puffing with the sales manager in his office before going home. I drove stoned, I sold stoned—everything was done stoned.

I noticed that cannabis didn't seem to affect the others in the way it did me. I never liked taking it with alcohol, which was something they did as a matter of course. In fact, they'd take anything they could get their hands on once they started, operating on the principle that the more you took, the more 'out of it' you became—which, for them, was the whole point. It just didn't feel like that to me.

I found myself using it more frequently on my own, becoming fascinated by the alternate perspectives that began to emerge. It became clear that there were entirely different ways to understand what had taken place in my life; this felt revelatory. But then I discovered something I wasn't expecting: I was living my life behind images of myself. I could be awkward in social situations, and these images—or masks—helped me manage the responses and reactions I struggled to process.

The moment I acknowledged that I wanted to understand why I required them, fear appeared. This wasn't a game. If I went looking for the reasons, I'd have to let myself become whatever I discovered—thereby surrendering the protection of the masks.

I could see how each mask represented a part of me, but none of them were truly me. It explained why I'd still be affected by the things people said or did. Since they only saw the man I showed them, how could anyone ever truly know me if so much of me remained hidden? Why would I use masks if this was the result? Yet they'd always been there, and I'd always taken them for granted; they just appeared whenever I required them. I couldn't imagine be-

ing in the world without them, but I also knew I wanted to find out why I couldn't manage without their protection.

Chapter 2

After

LOCKED in a cell with nothing to do—nothing to read or listen to, and nothing to even look at other than the cell itself—made time really stretch. I lay on the bunk staring at the ceiling, counting the tiles while twitching my foot left and right as the count increased. To break the monotony, I would pace slowly back and forth from one wall to the other. I didn't really sleep, and was genuinely pleased when someone finally came in to take me to court.

Entering the Magistrate's Court felt like stepping onto a stage; every eye in the room seemed to fix on me as I took my seat in the dock. Noting friendly faces in the public gallery, I realised that until that moment, I'd forgotten there was a life outside of this experience.

Once the clerk confirmed my details, the prosecution requested an adjournment to prepare the case. The question of bail was raised. The prosecution claimed I'd vanish the moment I was released, pointing out that it had taken the police three months to find me. They thought it would be best if I took up residence in Brixton Prison, just to be sure.

My solicitor countered this by saying that Peter had been granted bail, so it would be unfair if I were denied it. The prosecution then asked for bail to be set at £10,000, claiming this was the amount set for Peter. I knew this was untrue; his had only been £1,000.

After a short discussion, the three magistrates revealed their decision. They rejected the application for remand and ruled that no

financial surety would be required either. Instead, I was to surrender my passport—which the police already held—and was told not to apply for another. I was to remain at home and sign on at my local police station every morning until the next hearing, set for two weeks' time. I continued doing this until the final committal proceedings, nearly two months later.

While waiting in the foyer for my case to be called, a high-ranking police officer took me aside. I'd never seen him before, and standing at least a foot taller than me, he made me feel small as he loomed close. He was in full dress uniform, complete with ornate epaulettes and medal ribbons. He told me, quite simply, that my fingerprint had been recovered from a stolen cheque.

I nodded ever-so slightly, more as an acknowledgement that I'd heard him than anything else. I had no reason to doubt this; I hadn't worn gloves, and it was certainly possible to lift a print from paper—but none of this was mentioned in court. Without it, there was literally nothing linking me to anything that had taken place. I walked out a free man. Case dismissed.

I took out every book on spirituality from my local library. The Wisdom of the Overself by Paul Brunton definitely struck me—it spoke of something beyond the surface of life, beyond the masks I'd been wearing. I decided to put some of these ideas into practice, especially meditation. I didn't know what I was looking for. I only knew I was ready to look.

Towards the end of the year, my relationship with Mickey broke down. Mickey wasn't just my housemate; he was my best friend. While he wasn't the best salesman in the world, his friendship had been a huge part of me settling in at the dealership. Also

Jewish, he was a constant cannabis smoker. I spent hours sitting next to him in his car, rolling and sharing joints while he played Dire Straits at high volume as he drove aimlessly around.

We'd bought the maisonette from our former sales manager, intending to live there for a few years before selling it and splitting the profit. But I'd become increasingly reclusive. I didn't know Mickey would need to go first, but he ensured this happened by pocketing the money I gave him to cover my share of the mortgage, after I'd arranged for the payments to come out of his account after I'd lost mine. The mortgage went unpaid for months; it was only when I stumbled upon a letter from the bank revealing the extent of the debt that I knew it was over. It was just as well really; the interest rate had soared to over fifteen per cent, and the payments were becoming absurd.

I didn't blame Mickey for doing to me what I'd done to the dealership. He'd even quit his job after seeing me not having to work; he'd wanted to be part of things, and couldn't understand why he'd been left out, not realising I was already done with it. I can only imagine how this made him feel. I came back one day to find he'd moved out. He'd bought two matching armchairs when we moved in; he left me one.

I met an Israeli who was visiting my cousin's girlfriend, and before he went home, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I converted my remaining cash into travellers' cheques, purchased a one-way ticket to Tel Aviv, and simply walked away.

The moment I closed the front door, the weight that had been bearing down on me instantly lifted. I could now see that the person I'd been and the one I was becoming were entirely different. I understood then why I could never become the man I was capable of being while surrounded by people who only knew me as I used to be.

There was something about the way events began to unfold; it was as if they'd been prepared just for me, while simultaneously feeling like I was making everything up as I went along. I simply didn't need to worry about any of it.

Chapter 3

Israel

I'D EXPECTED the plane to be empty, but it was quite the opposite; not only was it the last flight out to Israel due to the impending Gulf War, it was packed with Israelis heading home.

The cabin was alive with singing and praying—it felt like I was in a flying synagogue at times. As we touched down, the atmosphere became electric. I was struck by a powerful sense of coming home, despite the fact I'd never set foot there before.

Felix, the man I met in London, was a lieutenant in the army. The first thing he did after picking me up was take me to a civilian supply centre to collect a gas mask.

The leaflet inside the box was blunt: I was to put it on the moment a siren sounded and keep it on until the all-clear. If I were ever exposed to gas, I was to inject my thigh with the syringe of Atropine attached to the lid.

We went out to rent a video that evening and found the streets completely deserted. It was an eerie experience driving through a ghost town where everyone was inside, waiting for what they knew was coming.

We were halfway through the film when an air-raid siren went off. The Israeli Defence Force were installing them as fast as possible, but they hadn't reached our area yet, so the distant wail didn't seem urgent. It wasn't until I heard the sound of the missile falling that I realised just how urgent it was.

We moved into his bedroom, where he'd already covered the windows with clear plastic sheeting. The Scud exploded in a near-

by field as he finished sealing the door with masking tape. I pulled on my mask, removing the filter plug so I could breathe, and instantly felt the room and Felix become my entire world. Nothing seemed to matter anymore. No past. No future. Nothing.

The gas mask was tight, designed to protect against chemical agents, but I found myself questioning whether I wanted to endure such discomfort out of fear. It wasn't long before the threat of gas no longer bothered me; I simply couldn't stand having a heavy, rubber-smelling contraption strapped to my face. I mumbled something to Felix and, before he could make sense of my words, yanked the straps and dropped it onto the bed.

He stared at me for a long moment, perhaps checking for signs of exposure. Then, once it became clear it wasn't the gas making me smile, he reached up and took his off, too.

The all-clear sounded three hours later; we'd spent the entire time talking. I'd felt no sense of anxiety or self-consciousness; every word I uttered was exactly what I intended to say. I'd often feel judged when I talked back home, especially if my thoughts strayed from the common thinking or contradicted something I'd said before. Now, I wasn't concerned if Felix didn't agree with me, nor did I have any fear of being rejected by him. I felt clear, sure, and certain. I also wasn't forming an attachment; in that moment, I began to understand the real nature of freedom.

For the first week, there were three missile attacks each day, though nothing else landed anywhere near us. The strikes then decreased to one a day, eventually tapering off to just a few sporadic alarms before they stopped for good.

After that, life essentially returned to normal—or a new version of it. It became a common sight to see people going about their daily business, carrying a gas mask at their side.

The Kibbutz office was still closed, which gave me more time to get to know Felix. As if we'd been friends our entire lives; the sense of being with a brother was strong. I could have stayed longer, and he made sure I knew I was welcome, but as soon as the office re-

opened, I felt a pull to move on. I wanted to find my place and settle into the life I'd come to experience.

The Kibbutz would be an old fishing village called Sdot Yam, halfway between Tel Aviv and Haifa, near the town of Hadera, next to Caesarea and its Roman amphitheatre. I hadn't chosen this one from the many available; instead, I allowed myself to be guided by the woman in the office. She told me she felt proud that someone from England would come to be a volunteer at such a time.

The taxi drove up the long, palm-lined driveway and pulled up outside the combined admin building and dining hall. It was early afternoon; work had finished for the day, and a state of siesta had settled over everything.

I went into the office and handed over my letter of introduction. Two volunteers were asked to show me where to go: Maxine, who was also from England, and Jacqui, from South Africa. Both were younger than me. The woman at the central office had told me that all volunteers had fled Israel because of the war, yet it was clear that some had decided to stay.

My new home was an old wooden hut—the first in a row of five terraced huts, situated in an area curiously named 'Beverley Hills'. Inside, there were two narrow beds, a rickety table, a similarly fragile wardrobe, and an electric heater, which remained necessary as the evenings were still a bit chilly.

Maxine brought in sheets and a blanket and helped me make the bed. She walked me through the daily routine—meal times, work times, and all the other practical bits of information she'd gathered during her time there. She seemed genuinely pleased to have someone new to whom she could pass on her knowledge.

I was given the following day off—a chance to find my feet and adjust to my new surroundings.

The south side of the Kibbutz faced the Mediterranean, with a vast stretch of beach at the foot of the hill. To the north, the land gave way to fields where their primary crop, bananas, grew in abundance. A manicured lawn spread out in front of the dining room, with an artist's studio tucked off to the side; the resulting marble sculptures were dotted all over the grounds. Near the main gates, a factory produced marble floor tiles, while a smaller workshop crafted kitchen cupboards from solid hardwood. A private sailing club bordered the west, and to the east—just a few minutes' stroll away—lay Caesarea, complete with ruined amphitheatre, which volunteers were free to enter and explore at their leisure when it was open.

At 6.30 the next morning, I took my place in the dining room—a rite of passage for all new volunteers. This was their way of taking your measure, seeing what you were made of. They started me off with cleaning tables, filling salt pots, and washing the floor, before I was moved into the kitchen to become the dishwasher. I did this for a few weeks until the manager asked if I'd like to work in their small grocery shop.

Tucked away at the side of the dining room, the shop was a place where members could pick up extra supplies from a modest selection of goods and produce. No money changed hands; whatever was taken was simply recorded in a ledger. My days were spent filling shelves, lugging boxes, and mopping the floor. It was repetitive, mundane work, but I didn't mind in the slightest. The fact that it required so little mental effort left me perfectly free to dwell on the philosophical ideas that continued to flood my mind.

As a volunteer, work clothes were provided if I wanted/needed them, and my washing was taken care of on a weekly basis by volunteers in the wash-house. We ate three meals a day with as much food as we wanted, and every Friday, a freshly-slaughtered roasted chicken supper with all the trimmings was served to our table as a thank-you for our work.

A carton of cigarettes was given out each month to those who

smoked—and even those who didn't sometimes took one to swap for something else. We were given ten pre-paid airmail letters each month to let people back home know we were still alive. And, once a month, we'd be led on a day's hike in a different part of the country, which became an overnight trip during the summer. They even gave us a bit of 'spending money'—not a lot, but we could use it in their non-profit shop. I felt completely at peace.

I started writing poetry for the first time in my life. An inspiring first line or even the whole concept would suddenly appear, accompanied by an urgent compulsion to: *WRITE THIS DOWN*.

I loved expressing myself this way. It sometimes felt less like creation and more like a process of transcription, as if the words were simply waiting to be caught.

I was sitting on a bench at the top of the hill overlooking the sea, watching the sun dip toward the horizon. One of the new volunteers sat down beside me; he was French and barely spoke a word of English. I didn't acknowledge him, but I did notice he was smoking a joint. As I did, he passed it to me, stood up, and walked away.

My mind expanded beyond anything I'd experienced. I saw, with total clarity, how my life was like a school and I'd been having very specific lessons. The mistake I'd been making was trying to understand what other people thought they'd learned from their lessons, applying their conclusions to my own life as if they were the only ones to reach. I'd allowed their perspectives to override and distort what I'd truly felt.

By the time I stood up, the sun had long since set. My surroundings felt as though they were now within me as much as I was within them; the boundary between what I called 'me' and what I experienced as 'everything else' had dissolved.

As I walked back, I could see exactly what was going on for any-

one I encountered—whether they were carrying sadness, loneliness, or worry. Whatever their internal state, it was projected through their eyes as a particular kind of light.

I found myself in the volunteers' common room, a space just as likely to be filled with the younger kibbutzniks. I saw how difficult it was for people to find whatever it was they were looking for.

I'd watch someone come in, clearly driven by a need, and the moment they thought they'd found what they were after, they moved immediately onto seeking the next thing. It looked as though they were trying to relieve some internal pressure; yet, whatever they found only produced a fleeting sense of relief, never enough to satisfy what was actually missing. In that moment, I knew what was missing, because in that moment it was no longer missing from me.

Many of the volunteers opened up about their lives and the reasons they'd come to Israel. Some were escaping from circumstances back home that they'd found too difficult to manage. I not only wanted to hear their stories but was able to listen without judgement. As they spoke, I'd pick up on the underlying issues and gently direct their attention toward a different way of seeing it. This seemed to break their repetitive loop of negative thinking. They could be themselves again without feeling the urge to escape, finding a genuine sense of peace.

Over a three-month period during the summer, when perhaps thirty volunteers from all over the world were there, the atmosphere of living and working alongside one another caused almost everyone to open up in a way that felt truly special.

At times, I felt like an observer looking over my own shoulder, yet I was participating fully and completely in every situation. I was operating from a place of such peace that it felt as though the very possibility of something 'wrong' happening had simply vanished; everything that took place felt exactly as it should be.

Sandrine was the other volunteer who'd stayed during the war. She'd been at the Kibbutz for over a year by the time I arrived.

One evening, I spotted her standing at the top of the hill, gazing out across the water. She seemed profoundly alone. I hadn't spoken to her so far; she was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen and was usually surrounded by men.

Shai—an American kibbutznik who'd become a friend—gifted me two mescaline tablets, the psychedelic compound contained within the Peyote cactus. I found a quiet moment to ask Sandrine if she'd like to join me.

She admitted she'd never taken anything beyond cannabis—which I didn't have currently—and she was naturally apprehensive, despite her curiosity. I assured her that I'd stay with her throughout the experience to ensure she felt safe.

She'd been invited to have dinner at a friend's place that Friday and had told them she'd be bringing me along. The plan was simple: eat first, then head back to her room and take the tabs. However, we spent the day together, and the dinner engagement slipped her mind completely. We ended up taking the mescaline barely ten minutes before she suddenly remembered exactly where she'd agreed to be.

She was really sceptical that something so small would have any effect on her, but I assured her it would be plenty for a first time. Because she wasn't yet feeling anything—it had, after all, only been ten minutes since she'd swallowed it—the moment the dinner memory returned, she insisted she still wanted to go. I'd never take a psychedelic before popping out to a dinner party, but because she had no experience, coupled with her thinking they'd have little effect on her, her mind was set.

We sat opposite each other. She started to giggle. Someone teased her about being in love with me as she wasn't making much sense. When they asked her if she'd taken anything, she said she hadn't. One man suggested she go outside and get some air.

I followed her outside thirty seconds later, only to find her look-

ing at me with relief. The man had been trying to kiss her, and I knew there was nothing she could do about it. While this was the headspace she needed to be in to look at herself honestly, he was simply taking advantage. We left immediately. I would not allow her to remain there in such a vulnerable state.

On the way back, one of her friends came running after us and asked if he could join us. The three of us made ourselves comfortable in her room. The stranger sat quietly in the corner; an unexpected witness to what was about to occur.

Sandrine began to open up. I guided her through everything that had been affecting her, until she could see herself, her life, and the actions of her father from an entirely different perspective. This took a few hours, but when the negativity that had built up over the years finally released itself, she burst into tears.

Our witness leant over to tell me that the only reason he'd followed us was to make sure she'd be alright. He apologised for having doubted me, but, like the others, he'd only just met me. He wanted to tell me about a problem of his own, but this was not the time for that. Sandrine went home to France a few weeks later.

I'd been thinking about Felix and decided it was time to visit him. The trouble was, I had no idea where he lived, other than Tel Aviv. I had no address or phone number. Shai came with me, and we set off one Friday afternoon.

Tel Aviv bus station was dark and chaotic when we arrived. Friday night marks the beginning of Shabbat—the night when most people do not work the following day; Israelis only have a one-day weekend. In a way, not having any idea where to go made things much easier; I simply got on the first bus that I saw was ready to leave. After its third stop, Felix's girlfriend stepped on board. She made her way towards the back and spotted me sitting there.

"Hi Simon. What are you doing here?"

“I’m coming to see you,” I said with a smile.

“Really? How lovely! But Felix isn’t here. He’s been called back to the base. I don’t know when he’ll be back.”

It didn’t matter.

She cooked delicious food and then made up a couple of beds on the living room floor. At 2 am, the front door opened and in walked Felix, dressed in full camouflage gear and carrying an M16 rifle. He’d been released from duty early.

It’s hard to imagine succeeding in such an endeavour. To have really thought about it would’ve made the journey pointless from the start. Any other bus, any other time, any other route, and I never see her. How many stops would I have gone before accepting that the bus was not going to take me to Felix? Yet his girlfriend just happens to get on. Nothing else made the outcome even remotely likely.

It feels strange that I made a journey like that. And yet, that is what happened. Life brought a perfect solution. I didn’t need to imagine it, hope for it, talk about it, or wonder what would happen if it didn’t work. Nothing else could’ve worked other than what did.

A small group of volunteers invited me to join them on a trip to Egypt. We’d take a bus from Tel-Aviv to Cairo—a journey of about twelve hours—following a route a previous group had already completed. They had a list of guest houses they’d stayed in, ensuring no time would be wasted searching for accommodation.

It was clear the group liked to make the decisions, and I was more than happy to let them. I simply went along with whatever they decided, handing over ticket money or room rent whenever they asked for it.

We arrived in Cairo just after sunset and made our way to the first guest house. Two rooms were rented between the six of us,

and as we were making an early start, it was decided we'd better get some sleep. I did try, but the mosquitoes wouldn't leave me alone. Normally, I'd control them with sprays or repellents, but I had nothing with me. My roommates decided to endure the stifling heat by closing the windows to stop more coming in, and went round splattering bodies onto the walls. I wrapped myself in the sheet, but by morning it was clear it had made little difference. I tried not to scratch, but this was easier said than done, what with the heat and humidity making me sweat constantly.

We spent the first day wandering around the pyramids. We then visited the valley of the Kings, only to find King Tut's tomb was closed for renovation. Karnak, the temple at Luxor, was next on the itinerary; no hanging around for us. They wanted to see everything as quickly as possible because everyone was looking forward to our final destination.

Luxor would be another twelve-hour journey, though at least in an air-conditioned carriage—no heat, no sweating, less scratching, and no mosquitoes. However, the air-conditioning was set so high it was more like riding inside a refrigerated wagon. Even though it was 43°C (110°F) outside, we had to climb into our sleeping bags just to keep warm.

With a little haggling, the price of the room was brought down a bit further, and after dropping off our bags, we went out to explore. I felt it would be easy to buy a little Egyptian hash, but we'd also heard rumours of how tough the authorities were on tourists caught with it. I was certain this only applied to large amounts intended for smuggling, but the others remained cautious about making any attempt to buy some.

I decided to hang back and ask a shopkeeper. The moment I mentioned what I was after, he smiled, became furtive, looking left and right to see who might be watching before telling me he didn't have any himself, but knew a man who did. He asked me to wait in the shop while he went to fetch it.

I decided to catch up with the others to let them know what

was happening. When I told them, they became afraid of him returning with the police. I told them to wait at the top of the hill so they wouldn't be included if he did. As I walked back, the shopkeeper was coming up to get me.

While I concluded my little business, someone was offering the others a large lump at a very cheap price. The deal was just concluding when I finally caught up with them. The Egyptian removed the lump, wrapped in cling film, from the elasticated part of his sock. After handing over the money and, looking rather pleased with themselves, we went back to the hotel to smoke it.

It's advisable to give what you're buying a sniff to get a sense of its quality. But nobody had done this. They were so caught in the greed of the moment, while also struggling with the fear of being discovered, that money changed hands without any sniffing taking place.

The scent of coffee grounds filled the room before it was even fully unwrapped. They didn't have a lot of money and had been careful about wasting it; even though it hadn't cost a lot to learn this lesson. An argument ensued, with each blaming the other for not having smelled it. Meanwhile I rolled a joint. I'd bought just enough for everyone to go on the night tour of the big temple, nicely stoned.

Our final trip to the Aswan dam was abandoned in favour of going to the place we'd been looking forward to from the start: Dahab.

Dahab is a Bedouin village on the edge of the South Sinai desert. It made its name in the 1970s as a hippie hangout. We were told by the Israelis who went there that it was the place to go if we wanted to smoke cheap, locally grown cannabis.

In one movement—and it nearly was for me, as I had food poisoning—we went from Luxor to Cairo, then from Cairo to somewhere near the border, finally finishing the twenty-hour marathon

by taxi. We arrived at Dahab at midnight.

We rented two huts for the equivalent of a £1, which came with mattresses and candles. We ordered some locally grown bud from one of the Bedouin boys, who brought us a hookah with lit coals to smoke it with, and within ten minutes of arriving, that is what we were doing.

Dahab was like nothing I'd seen before. It didn't matter what time of the day or night it was, there was always a tent selling the essential items that smokers always want—everything from cigarette papers to Jaffa Cakes, and all at high-street prices. You could easily forget you were in a Bedouin camp on the edge of the desert.

Because the night was so warm, most people slept outside, using their huts to store their belongings. There were a few campfires dotted here and there, with the sound of a guitar playing nearby. This was exactly how I'd imagined Dahab would be.

Tented cafés were available on the beach. No chairs, just mats or cushions, with board games to amuse the bored should they require them. We were never hassled or expected to buy anything, and the food was very cheap.

As Dahab sits on the coast, many people go there for the scuba diving. The guys rented a pair of flippers, a mask, and a snorkel to share. Unfortunately, when it was my turn, I stepped on something hidden amongst the rocks. Small, needle-like objects pierced through the flipper and into my foot. We had to spend ages picking them out.

I could see how easily someone could get lost here; time meant nothing. Those who arrived in the process of running away found it far too easy to stay longer than they intended.

I'd return to this place three more times during my time in Israel. Each time, the camp had changed; more permanent buildings had been erected; it was literally turning into a town. I was glad I got to experience Dahab before it changed completely. I'm not sure I'd recognise it today.

I came across an old, yellowing paperback in a tiny room the Kibbutz had set aside as a library for the volunteers. The book was titled: *Autobiography of an EX-Yogi*. I'd read Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*, so it intrigued me immediately. I wondered what would make a yogi give up, assuming that was what the title implied.

It turned out that using 'EX' referred to a stage beyond the awareness of a *typical* yogi; a state which, the book claimed, removed the need for any further title. The author had been sent to stay on the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, India, in the 1970s, and this was his story. I felt certain that I needed to go there next.

Poems

Israel, 1990s

World in life forget to try
Bare the pain start to cry
No regrets just move on
Start again
Sing your song
Are you worried?
Take my hand
Let me help you understand
It's not a problem don't you see?
Change your mind and you'll be free.

Thoughts and feelings light their faces
Strange expressions fill the air
All around we see the spaces
When we sit beneath and stare
Eye the world with shadows dancing
Close enough to ground the sky
Music singing
Soul enhancing
Treasures falling tears to cry
All alone with people round you
Will they listen to what they say?
Trust the wind she brings the future
Turn around and walk this way.

Each moment in life
Comes out life a knife
Blade sharpened and ready to go
It's edge is so sharp
It cuts through the dark
Standing out as if put there for show
As soon as you know it's a moment
The moment shoots into the past
A new one replaces it swiftly
Which moment was it that was last?
Was it this one or that one
Which way did it go?
A new one is here just the same
So get on with that one
Why think of what's gone
Or have you found out it's a game?
What's here is just now
What you feel is what counts
Deal with that in the way you know best
Don't worry about 'If'
Don't worry about 'When'
And life will take care of the rest.

All at once the bottle breaks
The ship is launched
The giver takes
Pinpoints of light fill up the sky
What we can see fate can fly
At once they shivered
It was not cold

Absorbing energy
New for old

When will it be
All by the first
Alone in darkness
So close can burst
We feel a light it shines alone
There is a reason to go home
When all the waves are on the beach
When serpents wings light up with fire
The dust of tomorrow settles on the floor
Ready for the piper taking for the poor
Arriving in the distance
By chance is it you?
Not the way to do it just the same

We try another
On a hill it falls
The snow, the wind
Don't move it
Now the word is on the ground
As water fills an empty space
On the edge where time stands still
The pool reflects what is the answer
Our circle comes
The penny drops
The heat is felt
It burns the paper brown
No more mask of the clown

At best they try to drown us
We float back to the top
The bubbles full of energy

Carry not the empty box
When dogs are on the war path
The cries of all are heard
The ravens tell the chickens
The mouth that speaks the word.

The sun rises high
Alone in the city
The frost melts quietly
Birds are in the trees
By themselves
The post box is empty
The stamps have all gone home
Many people are singing
It's raining onto stone
A light flashes on the spirit's shadow
At last the box begins to fill
What is the answer?

Today we find the key
Across the void of space
A small planet stirs
Waiting patiently
All things are known

In death's embrace we lift the veil
A song of fortune
The stranger's tale
When time will be
All things are done
The fever broken
The bandaged thumb

What is the table without the chair?
The fire's burning
The coal's aware

This place is right
We came this way
All of the gold was not to pay
The man who saw with tears of joy
He paid the piper and felt the ploy

When wise men stutter
The long grass grows
Across the valley in Jericho
Where horns were blowing
The rolling stones
A mass of people
When men were clones
It finds the answer
Inside is out
The berry's colour is the last to shout.

In sight of colour the face is searched
The eyes are mother they sparkle clear
Across a desert unknown in sand
Oasis of life where none have found
A world of others existing here
Afraid to leave their place is there
The rain is far the sky a glass
Stars await their chance to speak
How small a view no more to know
The moon grins silently
Its smile is bright

It feels the sea and pulls the stranger
Shore to shore there is no danger
The circle comes around again
This time forever.

Expressing sadness with a tear
Across the cheek
A line of liquid flows
Leaving the eye
Never to return
Taking the mood away

Suddenly
A smile is born
The face is changed
Wiped away
The sadness gone
The tear is finished
Its job is done
The heart is smiling.

Stay up late to watch the window
Something through to see and do
The angel's face reveals a treasure
Seen by many known by few
What is it for without a reason?
Just keep going round and round?
Learn the lesson life is teaching
Start again don't make a sound
Begin to walk the feet are able

All the while they knew they could
Turn and walk across the table
Leave a mark
It’s only wood.

Feel the danger in the forest
When the wind is blowing hard
Storm approaching in the distance
Thunder shouting no regard
Rain is pouring buckets flowing
Everything is soaking wet
Washed away most of the debris
All that’s left is what you'll get.

You can board the ark of Noah
With full knowledge of the rain
But only if you're ready
Will you get this chance again

Drop of rain
The key of life
The puddles circles
Arrive on time.

Touch of fingers in the darkness
Who is there that comes along
A silent world where thoughts are angels
All alone you sing your song
What dreams may come to take you dancing
Imagination lights the sky

Feel the love from those around you
Tears are falling not to cry
In the silence comes the answer
With the answer comes the sound
Of your soul which is forever
Light and laughter all around.

What is it that guides the stranger
On the front the light is bright
Not for one who sees the danger
All along was known the sight
Can the answer be the apple
Hanging from the tree of life?
Take a bite and lose the sweetness
Down to earth you bring your life
Before is felt again no longer
Only here is what you know
Strange and scary
Makes you stronger
Just in time to start the show.

Forget the passage you know it's true
Alone the eagle flies on with you
Against the soldier
The time not right
For when he falls
No more to fight
Forget the past the future learns
What feeling says when fire burns
Dream on you stranger

Around you go
This place is where you've come to know

When all is over
The moon is out
What's done is done
No need to shout
Pull back the curtains
Breathe in the air
A time of learning has come to bare.

They play with words
Don't mean a thing
They speak
But cannot say
Their sounds erupt from lips apart
While thoughts have flown away
In silence comes the words you seek
To say them only when
The moment comes
When in your mind
One word as good as ten
No need to shout of what you know
For silence can be loud
The words you say
Have truth this way
No one can be a crowd

Your aim to find the life within
Will take you on a path
Revealing what you need to see
Sometimes to make you laugh

But only what you need this now
Will gladly show its face
To deal with that
No need to know
Exactly what's in place
Stand back a bit
Hold onto breath
Look round and take a peek
The play you watch
Has been performed
On every day this week

When actors play with script away
They speak without a seam
There's no belief the scene is real
As real as in a dream
They have the know
That next comes next
We see it only now
We think we know what comes along
Not only when but how
If life is based around these words
Our now becomes so tough
Our minds are on all thoughts like this
It's time to say enough
Look inside
Be still and calm
Reflect on what you see
Deal with the thoughts that make you think
No longer you
But me.

The sun pours forth her light of life
With golden hands
She touches all
Close your eyes and feel her caress upon you
Nothing can be the same again
The blind man feels the same as you
The sun knows not the difference
She'll touch any who step before her
A cloud passes by
No one is judged

She begins to leave us for the night
The sky can only celebrate
Painting colours for all to see
No one is sad
For somewhere she is waiting
And tomorrow
She will rise again.

The life within I can't explain
When from outside you look
The same as if you only read the cover not the book
It's not a life for everyone
Least not as yet the way
One day may come
When you'll become
Another one to say
That all we see around us
Is not the whole but some
Each one seeing different
All who have begun
To understand the truth of life

A journey just for you
To choose this way
Or stay and play
Life's game until you do.

I am a leaf
I wish to move
Choose my own direction
To be free
It is difficult for I am so attached
Suddenly I fall...
I am carried by a great force
And I am frightened
I no longer have control
I don't understand and try to resist
Where will I go?
I must give way to the great one
Who can move me effortlessly

I AM THE WIND
I KNOW YOU
I MOVE YOU ONLY WHERE YOU NEED TO GO
NOTHING IS RANDOM
HAVE NO FEAR
KNOW ME
AND I WILL BLOW YOU TO HEAVEN.

The stranger returns to find no one is there
As he sits all alone
With their look and their stare

In their eyes he is stranger
For he lives unlike them
To know him is danger
Not like once was then
But the sun always shines on the tips of the trees
The leaves fall away leaving someone who frees
Us all from the cold of the ice in their eyes
With words on the wind
That ignores all the lies
As if taking away what was turning to dust
From the shore of all truth
With a love that's a must
And it starts at the end
With beginnings to know
But what comes is forever
It's the circle we grow

At the dance of the moment
When all thoughts are now
The past meets the future
To show them somehow
And the night that is day
Goes around to return
To a place some might say
Needs a life just to learn
What you take you will lose
And your tears will run dry
As you dream of the night
When you really will cry
Look up
Find the answer
It's there on the hill
Where the bells will be ringing
A time when you will

Stand up for your future
It comes with the rain
As the flight of the vulture must never remain
What is seen in your eyes
Holds the love in your heart
That is not a surprise
As it's only the start

And with that now the end
As with all things must come
The words that are put
Are for all
Not just some.

Angels face within the doorway
Shining light upon my eyes
Never meant to be a stranger
Doesn't come as a surprise
Just when things are set in motion
Comes along that hand of fate
Changing hearts into such beauty
Not too early
Nor too late
Revealing worlds where all can enter
Side by side and heart to heart
Always sharing
Always caring
Never more to be apart.

We can only pass on what we know

To those who are ready to show
That understanding is what they must find
By the longing that lights up their mind
If we try to pass on what is known
To those who have yet to be shown
That life is a lesson in love
Sent down from the truth high above
They may not see the light on the face
That has chosen to enter this place
And will not try to pull themselves through
As the one they can see
Is not you
Those not ready will have to let go
Slipping back to the stream and the flow
Returning to finish the play
Life's circle must teach them the way
Going on with this life like another
The time is not right
To be other
Only those who are ready will come
As the darkness dissolves with the sun
They will hear what you say with their heart
Changing life out of love from the start

The connection was there all the time
Many things are revealed in this rhyme
Spirit will show what to see
As you find what was tied
Becomes free.

"Side by side"

With apparent separation
Here is also there
A different combination
Revealing life to share
Looking at myself
An open mind with soul
Taking past remembrance
To return what once was whole
With spirit pushing gently
My heart begins to beat
Creating circumstances
Designed for us to meet
Lighting up the journey
Where once before we stood
Alone in separation
Praying where we could
Moving through the forest
Where life seems all the same
With continued separation
Only questions will remain

Something new beginning
I must look over there
What's possible is endless
All because we care
Removing separation
Over there comes here
With thoughts of life together
It has to disappear
Watching from a distance
Standing very still
Holding all the moments
Of what can be and will
Waiting for the answer

Coming with the light
Nothing stops the spirit
Do what must be right
My heart can beat no faster
As long as things still hide
Must wait to be discovered
Walking side by side.

Love is a word
That we misunderstand
If we try to possess it
It slips through our hand
We expect it to stay
In our life without cause
But love is far more and is free without laws
It will flow in our heart
If we channel it through
Not just for ourselves
Chosen one or a few
Love is a light that must reach everyone
No conditions attached
Giving all not just some
It is we that must open to the feeling love brings
By changing our lives into something that sings
By finding the space in between all the rest
Where the spirit is real and the journey is blessed
Love is apart but for only as long
As it needs to stand back
While it teaches its song
It is subtle and gentle
As it makes its way in
To the places where really before never been

And love is so real it will seek to the end
To make those who don't see
Feel it's really their friend
And no matter how hard
We might try not to know
We can't help but discover
That love runs this show
When this stage has been reached
The word reveals more
Much more to be realised than ever before
And so we begin our return to the light
What we came here to find
For so long out of sight
Our lives can now change
Into what they should be
Revealing the spirit in all that we see

So now it is time
To discover the rest
Of our soul separated
When starting this quest
For each at the first separates into night
Until spirit reveals that the time is now right
To take up the journey
Becoming as one
Now walking together
As daughter and son
And regardless of all our mistakes on the way
Revealing this truth calls all the rest into play
And the love that's been waiting
To burst through our hearts
For just such a moment
Completes what it starts
What was missing returns

To take up in life
Now the man becomes husband
And the woman his wife
Our circle continues but unlike before
When our bodies embrace
What will come is much more
The soul that is called will descend with a must
All because we are ready
To have in our trust
One who will come
For the love we can give
A soul who now waits
Will soon choose to live
Nothing compares with how this will be
Except all the love that brings this to me

In heaven the angels sing
Their sound fills me with new delight
With their voice comes a look
No words express it
Fingers touch
We embrace
Heart beats faster
Closer and closer
Spirit guides until only love remains
I reach out and touch what's inside you
My body tingles
Nothing is more real
Life is changing
I am changing
The angels sing louder
The music of today gently pushes us towards tomorrow.

After sitting so close
When the time comes around
The hug and the kiss
Separates without sound
My fingers release
What was held and caressed
My eyes look away
To get on with the rest
But the pull from my heart
Must return just as soon
As the tide has no choice
But to walk with the moon
I must wait in the shadows
A world full of space
This life taking time to allow my embrace
But the sun shines a moment
Each day after rise
When two hearts come together
And their touch fills my eyes
The magic lives on
While we dance in the air
The song of the spirit
Prepares me to share
My heart brings me forward
To the beginning of my life
When the shadows disappear
And the woman is my wife
All it takes is the future
On its way here somehow
When this gift is fulfilled
Turning soon into now.

Chapter 4

Thailand

I MET Debra a year before I left for Israel. She was my cousin's girlfriend and they'd just moved into a flat together. Debra was an aerobics instructor who only worked a few hours each week. I helped them with the decorating, and I'd often hang out with her when Adam had to go to work. We'd smoke cannabis, sometimes listen to music, always chatting. I liked this time with her.

Adam, who was a lot younger than me, began accusing her of having an affair, although he never said anything to me. I did have feelings for her, but nothing ever happened between us.

After Debra heard I was back, she split up with Adam, moving out of their flat and back in with her parents. She transferred her share of the property and the mortgage over to him; as far as she was concerned, their relationship was over.

A week before I was intending to leave, she came to see me. It was the first time we'd spoken since I'd returned. She told me she'd ended things with Adam, and when I told her what my plans were, she asked if she could come with me.

Debra was a second-dan black belt in Karate and had always wanted to study Thai boxing. She wanted to go via Thailand, where we could spend a few weeks as a couple; then, once she was ready to start boxing, I'd continue on to India.

Not long after we arrived, she dropped the idea of boxing entirely, wanting to carry on to India with me. Things had been going well, so we made our way back to Bangkok—a place neither of us ever wanted to revisit, but where the Indian Embassy was located.

We'd have to stay a few days to get her a visa.

Having just finished lunch in the food court of a shopping mall, we were approached by a middle-aged Thai couple. After a bit of small talk, they offered to take us sightseeing—we'd just need to go with them to pick up their car. It was intriguing.

After a short taxi ride to the suburbs, we pulled up outside a terraced house where a man was standing by the front gate. He was in his sixties and wore a big smile.

The couple excused themselves and headed upstairs as we went inside. The man spoke to Debra—just a little polite conversation—before turning his attention to me. He asked me several profound spiritual and philosophical questions, which somehow mirrored the exact ideas I'd been exploring. It felt like some kind of test—as if he already knew the answers and was waiting to see if I did too.

He then revealed something that had haunted him for years. Despite having good intentions, the events that unfolded had left him burdened with a heavy sense of guilt. It seemed obvious to me that he'd been well-meaning, and I told him why. He looked visibly relieved and expressed his sincere gratitude for helping him feel better.

He invited me to visit the casino where he worked as a croupier. He promised that no matter where I placed my bet, he'd act as if I'd won and pass me my winnings.

I might've gone along with this not too long ago—if only for the potentially interesting experience—but instead, I turned him down. He looked genuinely shocked, as if this was totally unexpected. Only embarrassment seemed to remain now, and he asked me to keep in touch, writing his details on a piece of paper, folding it carefully, and handing it to me. We were then ushered out to where a different taxi was waiting to take us back to the hotel. He didn't need to know which one; he already knew where to go. There was no charge.

While this sounds almost too fantastical to be true, especially given the questions he asked me initially, something was obviously afoot. When I later found out that Debra's father managed a casino in London, that caught my attention; the casino con-

nection seemed a touch coincidental. When Debra mentioned that her dad was friends with Thailand's chief of police, the pieces suddenly fell into place; he may have been the man asking the questions.

I can't say what might have happened had I accepted his bizarre proposal, if they'd gone to this much trouble to tempt me. I might have experienced a very different outcome from the one being suggested.

I was sitting on the hotel bed while Debra looked out of the window. Without turning round, she said she'd always wanted a child. Then she told me she was pregnant. She said she'd stopped taking the pill several months earlier, after no longer wanting sex with Adam. I could feel myself beginning to doubt what was going on. What did this mean for my journey?

Two things then occurred simultaneously: my mouth puckered into a closed circle, as if I'd just sucked on something very sour. My arms rose level with my chest, slightly bent at the elbows, palms facing down, both hands tingling. I then experienced what I can only describe as LOVE. There was nothing but a feeling of becoming, merging, and knowing—as if I was dissolving into something vast and unconditional.

I must have closed my eyes, because when I opened them again I saw Debra sitting on the edge of the chair, looking very concerned. She came and sat next to me, taking hold of my hand, which I instinctively pulled away. I instantly felt bad for doing that, as I knew she was only looking to comfort me, and pulling away would give the impression that what was taking place was about what she'd just said. I reached for her hand and squeezed it briefly.

Then she disappeared from my awareness, as did everything else. The feeling of love intensified to such a degree that it seemed as if I wouldn't be able to bear it much longer. There was no sense of anything: no past, no future, no self—only this overwhelming presence, filling every part of me.

A question suddenly entered my mind: 'What about the children?' I reached for it, feeling it earth me instantly, and everything

went into reverse. I didn't know what the question meant—what children?—but it brought me back to myself. Like a washing machine finishing its spin cycle and slowly coming to a stop, my hands lowered and my mouth relaxed.

I couldn't even begin to process what had just happened. But one thing was now absolutely clear: I had to go to India alone. It wasn't a decision I made—it was something I knew, as if it had been decided long before I ever arrived in this room. Debra accepted this the moment I told her.

The cheap flight I found required a three-day layover in Sri Lanka. I didn't mind in the slightest. I was ready to begin this journey on my own.

Debra returned to the UK using the open ticket her father had given her. We both left Thailand at the same time.

Chapter 5

Sri Lanka

THE PLANE LANDED AROUND MIDNIGHT. I took a taxi to a guest house chosen by the driver, about thirty miles from the airport, just outside the capital, Colombo. It was a nice enough room, but I checked out the next morning to find somewhere else.

Walking towards town, I heard someone call out to me. I turned to see an elderly gentleman walking quickly towards me. He was smartly dressed, wearing a bowler hat and carrying a black umbrella. He asked if I was looking for a room and offered to show me one not far from where we were.

He not only found me an excellent room, but insisted on giving me a tour of the area. I visited the museum, a large Buddhist temple, even the zoo—although I wouldn't have chosen the latter had I known his intention. We travelled by bus and rickshaw, charged at local, rather than the higher tourist prices.

Assulka's wife had died a few years earlier, and his sister ran a children's home. He said the home received vegetables by donation, but rice still had to be bought. It had become quite expensive to feed fifty mouths. I asked him to arrange for a 75 kg sack to be delivered on my behalf.

The following day we met again. We took a bus to see the ruins of an ancient community. The journey let me appreciate the beauty of the island. Everywhere was green and lush, with small shanty villages blending perfectly with their unspoilt surroundings.

Having spent many months walking barefoot on the kibbutz, my feet were now tough enough to deal with most terrain, but the

heat was something I still struggled with. There were times when I could only move from shaded section to shaded section just to avoid getting burnt. It really brought home why people wore footwear—and how easy it is to forget the basics when you're trying to prove something to yourself.

Assulka asked to borrow fifteen pounds when we got back. He said he'd return it after breakfast, well ahead of my departure for the airport. The following morning came and went, and by midday I had to accept he wasn't going to show. I really thought he'd borrowed the money, but perhaps this was just his way of getting me to give him something for his time. I felt a little naïve.

I paid the bill and started walking towards the airport. It was too far to make it the whole way on foot but I wanted to think about what had happened. I'd gone about a mile, when I noticed a small group of people huddled in a narrow alleyway between two buildings—I don't know why I was even looking, but as I did, one of them noticed me and said something to the others, which caused a second man, who'd been obscured until then, to look up. I must've been the last person Assulka was expecting to see. People take a taxi to the airport; they don't walk part of the thirty miles on foot. He came over, appearing a bit flummoxed, then acted just as friendly as he'd always been. He told me his sister used my money to bail somebody out of jail. He'd planned to see me after lunch and had sent a boy to tell me this. I watched a small bead of sweat trickle slowly down the side of his face.

He offered to buy me a cold drink. We crossed the road to a conveniently placed hut where he ordered a tea for himself and a Coke for me. He finished his tea quickly, then excused himself by saying he'd need to make a quick call. I finished my drink slowly, then took a taxi to the airport.

I knew what 'making a quick call' meant. I just didn't care. At first, I hadn't understood why he'd deceived me—I liked him and thought we'd become friends. I'd been fooling myself, or allowing myself to be fooled. Having understood this during the walk, I'd let

it all go. I never imagined I'd see him again. I was happy to leave things as they were. I'd learned something about myself—that I could be duped, but I could also let it go. That seemed to be what mattered. I can only assume therefore that this totally unlikely coincidence—me walking past that alley at that exact moment—was for him. He needed to be seen. He needed to know that someone knew what he'd done.

Chapter 6

India

I WAS SOMEHOW able to walk right through passport control without anybody stopping me to inspect or stamp my passport. I realised it would likely be a problem trying to explain why I didn't have an entry visa when I left, so I turned to go back in, just as an official came running out to get me.

I changed some money with a man standing just outside the airport doors. I liked black market rates when I could get them, having done this a few times in Israel, where the money changers stood right outside the banks, openly and without challenge.

I was soon being driven through a hot and noisy city, and already wanted to leave. I'd asked the rickshaw driver to find me a modest guest house, but I could have asked him to just take me into town, because as the vehicle slowed for traffic, a young man jumped onto the side. Having to shout over the noisy two-stroke engine, he said he'd direct the driver to a good hotel. I didn't say a word, nor did the driver. I just assumed hitching a ride into town was normal.

After I paid the driver, the clip-on passenger asked me to give him something too. I hadn't asked for his help, nor was it obvious that he'd done anything, so I just walked away. But I immediately felt bad, and when I looked back, I could see him pressed against the glass front door looking like he'd been terribly wronged. A few rupees were all he wanted.

After checking into the 'good hotel', I went out to explore the area. From the moment I left the building, there were people sit-

ting by the side of the road with their hands raised towards me. Some were blind, some disfigured, some barely able to walk. I gave them all something, but quickly felt uncomfortable doing so.

A young girl wearing filthy rags walked beside me. She seemed no older than seven. I took out a five rupee note. She raised her hand tentatively and as her fingers touched the edge, she grabbed it and bolted down an alleyway. I went back to the guesthouse. It was enough.

Sitting on the bed, listening to the sounds of life coming in from the street, it suddenly occurred to me that I had no idea why I was there. Like waking up from a dream, I became overwhelmed by the realisation that I'd just let everyone I cared about go. This weight became very hard to bear; it felt as though I'd made a huge mistake.

Then, everything ceased to exist. I no longer remembered anything from before, nor had any sense of where I was heading, or even who I was. There was nothing but a sense of awareness. I sat with this for ages, accepting it as best as I could.

I eventually reached for the bedside drawer and found a Gideon Bible inside. This was the first time I'd ever held a copy of the New Testament. I started to read it from the beginning, but didn't get very far before I turned over a large portion and found myself at the start of John's Gospel. I made my way through it, and by the time I'd finished, I no longer doubted myself or why I was there. I was certain once again that I was doing the right thing.

I checked out of the guesthouse the next morning and headed for the bus station. After I paid the rickshaw driver, a young boy asked me where I was going. He led me through the chaos and onto an empty bus, which started filling up just after I stepped onboard. The journey would be four hours and the boy offered to buy me a bottle of water. I gave him a few coins and he came back with a

large, cold bottle.

With one hand constantly on the horn, the driver forced everyone out of the way. With adrenaline trickling, the trip felt more like a fairground ride than a journey on public transport.

Midway through the journey, a man sitting on my right began miming that he was about to throw up. I was by a barred, glass-less window. His gesture was gentle and without expectation. After quickly swapping places, he managed to get his stomach contents out, remaining with his face wedged between the bars until he got off.

The bus finally pulled into Pondicherry. I stepped out into a mass of rickshaw drivers vying to take me. I let them argue the point amongst themselves and got into the vehicle I was eventually led to.

The area around the bus station seemed just as hectic as Madras had been, but it soon became much quieter. Then, everything turned French: French street names, French-style houses. I had no idea what to expect, but it certainly wasn't old-colonial France.

The Ashram took up one whole block, with the small entrance near a corner. A man sitting on a stool just inside the doorway asked me to remove my boots.

The plant-lined path took me to a courtyard where a rectangular block of grey/white marble was covered with patterns of freshly-laid flower petals. A tree with branches acting as a natural canopy towered over it, with crows squawking their right to be there too. People were sitting wherever they wanted, some close to or touching the block itself. It all felt very peaceful.

> The block contained the remains of the ashram's founders, Sri Aurobindo, and his French companion, Mirra Alfassa, known as the Mother. She'd first seen him in a dream while still living in her native France, only meeting him after she felt called to make a three-month journey by ship in the 1920s.

I saw a man standing at the back. A strange look appeared on his face as I approached, and he raised his finger in that universal gesture: 'shush'. As he did this, an older man came forward. I said I

was looking for a teacher. He invited me to sit, telling me as I took off my backpack that the man I'd approached had taken a vow of silence.

Sitting cross-legged has never been comfortable for me; something to do with my circulation I believe, but I managed twenty minutes, and then the old man got up and asked me to follow him. I shouldered my pack and picked up my boots. We left the ashram and walked until, at the top of an old-style colonial building, sitting by himself, I met Sukhvir.

Sukhvir was tall and lean, but not skinny. He looked in his sixties, had short, greying hair, and was clean-shaven with a strong face. He stood up as we entered. The two men said something to each other before we all sat.

Sukhvir closed his eyes for a moment, then looked at me without saying a word. Finally, in excellent English, he said, 'What would you say is the most important thing for anyone embarking upon a spiritual journey?'

I wasn't expecting to go into class, but I could feel the importance of answering him well, like this was an interview of sorts. I nearly slipped into that state I sometimes fall into, where I just start speaking without knowing what I'm going to say. But since I didn't know what to say, the feeling quickly dissipated. After a few seconds of silence, I found my answer: "You have to really want to." Sukhvir smiled, asked the old man to arrange a room in one of the ashram's guesthouses, and invited me to come back once I'd settled in.

I had no idea Pondicherry was by the sea, and the guesthouse was almost on the beach. Inside the gates were several small placards on sticks with little thoughts written on them. A small café offered simple food and drink, even a laundry service, although no machines were involved in the process. There were several people sitting on the lawn, meditating, exercising, or just reading.

After a shower I went out to explore. A man standing just outside the gates asked if I wanted to change money on the black mar-

ket, reminding me that it was Saturday and all the banks were shut. I stepped into his cycle rickshaw and watched him put a great deal of effort into riding over the bumpy, pot-holed roads, until we arrived at a tiny workshop that seemed far too dark and also full of flies. He spoke to the shopkeeper, who jumped onto a motorbike and rode away leaving everything open. I sat by the roadside and had a chat with my driver.

The biker returned ten minutes later, quoting a figure three points above the rate at the airport. I handed him a twenty-pound note. He rode away again and I carried on talking to Raj. I'd just brought up the subject of finding something to smoke, when the man returned, counted a thousand rupees in crisp fifty-rupee notes into my hand and asked me to come back when I needed more.

Raj knew where Sukhvir lived. When I mentioned my plan to see him shortly, he said he'd wait for me to take a shower, then take me when I was ready. He said he'd wait outside, even though I couldn't tell him how long I'd be, then take me to get what I was looking for.

Talking with Sukhvir was so easy; he understood exactly what I'd been going through. He asked me to visit him the next day, telling me about a communal meditation he'd like me to attend in the evening. He also mentioned he had a spare room which I was welcome to use. I thanked him for the offer, but said I'd remain in the guesthouse for now.

I stepped into the waiting rickshaw without needing to say a word. Raj took me down even narrower streets than before. People were living in mud huts, with many standing outside, talking. There were small groups everywhere.

He pulled over and asked me to wait. Two women just stared at me. After a minute, Raj beckoned for me to join him. I followed him until we came to a gap between two huts. It was almost pitch black. He stepped in first, carefully guided my foot down the step I hadn't seen, finally lifting a cloth covering the entrance.

The hut was completely empty, except for a few wicker mats

and an old woman lying on one. He brought over a mat, placing a candle next to it. I took out a pack of rolling papers and proceeded to roll something with the sample he gave me. The old woman got up and placed several golf-ball-sized, scrunched-up balls of newspaper in front of me before lying back down on the floor. Raj opened them to show me what was inside: eight quid the lot.

I'm sitting on my little balcony overlooking the garden and the sea. The wind is blowing gently, the air is very warm, and the sky is filled with stars. Apart from the waves breaking gently onto shore, it is absolutely silent.

I could only stay in the guesthouse for one night as there was a festival approaching and all the rooms were booked. I found Raj and went in search of somewhere else. As we passed the ashram, the old man I'd first spoken to was outside, pacing back and forth. I stopped to explain my situation and found out the ashram ran two other guesthouses. He offered to show me where they were.

Even though he hadn't been present when the offer was made, Mohan reminded me of Sukhvir's spare room, so I wasn't to worry if the guesthouse was fully booked too. I was able to rent a room for three nights. I also received a pass to the ashram's dining room.

I watched the porter place a pole into a hole in each corner of the bed frame, then cover them with what looked like a sheet, but was a mosquito net made of cotton—a heavier and more effective version of the nylon nets in Sri Lanka.

The room had narrow sliding windows facing the street, which allowed the sound of traffic, Indian music, and other life noises to waft in, together with a gentle, cooling breeze. A large clay pitcher of water sat in the corner which kept its contents remarkably cool.

The dining room was housed in a separate building. It had a courtyard with a circular patch of grass in the centre, surrounded by a concrete path leading up to a huge set of wooden doors. Diners sat on the floor at small, low tables, or at the back if they preferred to eat in silence. A salt pot was placed on each table.

Holding a stainless steel tray, I moved along the line, receiving rice, mild vegetable curry, freshly-baked wholemeal bread, a few little bananas, and a spoon, and I collected a small jug of water from a young girl filling them from a continuously running pipe. Waste went into a bin, the spoon was dropped into a sink, and the tray was handed to a group of chatting women.

Sukhvir had asked me to attend the communal meditation, but I hadn't asked him where it was, so when I left the guesthouse, I received directions from the 'watcher of the keys', who sat just inside the gates. I followed his words carefully, but ended up at the sea front instead. Many people were sitting on the low promenade wall, letting the breeze blow over them. I found a space and sat down.

The small group to my right had a dog with them. The dog came over, which seemed to surprise them, especially when it rested its head on my foot. I could hear snippets of the conversation as they blew over with the breeze, and when I looked closer, I saw a European man dressed like a local, sitting on the edge of the cliff. He had a French accent, yet the more I listened, the more Indian it sounded. The waves made it difficult to hear.

A beggar approached. The dog raised its head and growled. The beggar moved on and the dog resumed his place on my foot. A few minutes later, the dog was growling again. The Frenchman had left the cliff edge and was now sitting on the wall peeling an orange. He was offering some to a beggar, who wasn't interested in the orange and made a face as he reluctantly took it, before moving towards me. The dog stood in front of me growling loudly. The beggar stood in front of the dog with his hand raised. He was imploring me to give him, 'Lah! Lah!'—meaning 'Allah, Allah'—not ask-

ing directly, just reminding me of his connection to the divine. This was something all the beggars did. The dog's growl suddenly increased and it lunged at him. It never touched him, but it was enough to make sure he moved on.

I hadn't noticed that someone was now sitting next to me. As I turned, he proceeded to tell me all about the man on the cliff: He'd been in Pondicherry for ten years, and always sat in the same spot each evening. He was one of the first European ashramites.

None of this had brought me any closer to the meditation place. I walked back the way I'd come and saw someone standing outside a large building. This was it, but I couldn't go in now because once the meditation started they always locked the door.

As I walked along the seafront, a man riding an empty cycle rickshaw pulled up in front of me. He had tears in his eyes. He told me his wife had just given birth to a stillborn baby and was in need of a blood transfusion. She was in the hospital and he had to find three hundred rupees to pay for it. He asked me to help, appearing genuinely desperate, so I got in.

We'd only gone a few yards when I realised I didn't need to go with him. I stopped him and got out. He looked confused, and just as he began to cry again, I gave him what he needed, wished his wife better, and walked away.

> I later realised this was likely a scam, but to have seen it that way at the time would have changed things for me. If it was genuine, I helped someone in desperate need. If it wasn't, his performance earned him enough not to have to work for a while. A single fare brought in just a few rupees, and there were many rickshaws looking for business.

Raj always waited in the same spot, but today I couldn't find him anywhere. One of the other drivers offered to take me instead. It turned out he was Raj's brother, and when I looked a little closer, I could see it was the same rickshaw.

I was still walking barefoot, and just as in Sri Lanka, the roads

were becoming too hot. With John's help, I found a pair of sandals. With my footwear in place, I went to find some paper to write on. I came across a tiny shop that appeared to have what I needed, but I was still using a fountain pen, and their cheap pulp paper would be too porous. The shopkeeper didn't offer to sell me a biro; he just directed me past a temple where he said I'd find what I was looking for.

An old, emaciated man was sitting by a gutter, using a piece of coconut shell as a spoon to eat something that had been discarded. How hungry must he have been to do that? I took a hundred-rupee note and folded it until it was the size of a coin. I stood beside him; as he raised his hand without looking up, I put the note in and closed his fingers around it.

Outside the gates of a temple, an old man sat in a sparkling white loincloth surrounded by several women. The woman on his right lifted her hand, gesturing for me to give him something. I gave her something instead. A second woman shouted that she wanted something too. I made a gesture that they should share it, and a third woman shut her up. I walked on and found the paper I wanted.

There was a temple, not far from the ashram, where people with leprosy gathered during the day, some of them in terrible physical condition. The first time I walked that way I gave someone a little something. Another woman burst forward, screaming to be given something too. I repeated my sharing gesture from before. She responded in a way that suggested they wouldn't give her anything, so I gave her something too. She accepted it graciously and backed away.

People on the other side of the road, having seen the commotion, started coming towards me. Some were limping, some dragging legs without feet; most had their arms outstretched, some

with hands deformed or missing fingers, imploring me to give them something too. I felt such a wave of desperation that I gave away my remaining coins and walked on. I never went that way again.

After three days at the guesthouse I accepted Sukhvir's offer of a room. It was on the ground floor of the building and had two glassless barred windows looking out onto the street. There was a large iron key for the heavy wood and metal door. It had an unheated shower at the back of the courtyard, together with a pour-your-own-water-down-a-hole toilet. I soon got used to using it and discovered I actually preferred it.

It felt as though I was sharing the room with a large squadron of Pondicherry's mosquitoes, but I would've been perfectly content to remain there if that was all there was. A few days later, once it became vacant, Sukhvir asked me to move upstairs into the room next to his.

I soon got into a routine of visiting the ashram at least once a day. It was such a peaceful place to sit, and so different from the hustle and bustle everywhere else. I'd sometimes walk the streets, but there was always a chance of being approached by children. They were inquisitive, and I didn't like avoiding them when I just wanted to be alone. Some of the younger ones would sneak up behind me and rub at my tattoo to see if it would come off.

After having sat in the Ashram for an hour or so, I made my way back. It was late afternoon and people would be outside again now that the intense heat of the day was beginning to subside. But today was different; there was nobody anywhere.

As I approached the junction with the busy main road in and out of town, which was always full of lorries, buses and cars, with

their horns sounding no matter what time it was, there was absolutely nothing—not a single vehicle.

A man stood in the middle of the road with his back to me. He looked over his shoulder for a moment; an elderly man with a dappled grey, short-cropped beard, dressed in white. As I went to pass him, he moved across my path at just the right moment, forcing me to stop. I stood there looking at him without saying a word. I could hear him repeating something over and over. I walked on, and so did he, right by my side. He then took hold of my hand and pulled me across the empty road, like a mother pulling a reluctant child. Two things occurred to me: I didn't know what was happening, but it was nothing to worry about. The first thought felt like me, but the reassurance felt like something else.

As we approached Sukhvir's front door, I hesitated slightly, causing him to stop. He didn't release my hand but just stood there as if waiting for something. As I looked at his hand holding mine, an odd feeling appeared—it became stronger and stronger until it became so strong that I experienced a deep desire for him to continue leading me wherever he'd been going before I hesitated. I gestured for him to carry on, but instead he released my hand and walked back the way we'd just come from. I felt a tinge of disappointment, but also accepted that this strange experience was now over. I looked over my shoulder as I went to carry on. There was nobody there.

It wasn't his disappearance that fascinated me, it was the fact that the area had been completely deserted while he was present, only to return to life the moment I looked back. People were out walking, bicycles and scooters went riding by. Lorries, buses and cars flowed noisily on the busy main road.

I could have taken breakfast in the ashram's dining room, if I were willing to be there at 6:15 am and enjoyed plain yoghurt, but the

small, open-fronted shop in the centre of town produced something far tastier: curried chicken wrapped in a large, fresh chapatti, with a small dollop of sauce on the side for dipping. I loved it and had one often. They also prepared freshly squeezed juice the night before: a few jugs of pineapple, apple, or red grape, chilled just right. Whenever I turned up, the owner would pour a glass of whatever they had without either of us needing to say a word. If I turned up a little too early, while they were still cleaning and preparing for the day, he'd put a stool on the street, bring out the juice, and I'd sit there watching the world go by until they were ready to cook.

One morning, I was looking at the junction opposite, when I saw a rickshaw run over a puppy's leg. The little thing was crying and limping, until it finally sat down in the middle of the road, clearly in pain. A man came over and shook his fist at the departing vehicle. I'd seen him a few times. He slept on the street nearby and had elephantiasis, which made his left leg grossly swollen.

Two women came over and picked up the puppy, placing it onto the pavement. The traffic increased for a moment and I could neither see nor hear the dog. When it cleared, the dog was no longer crying; instead, it was trotting around without any trace of a limp, playing in the same part of the road as if nothing had happened.

I saw a man walking towards me. I decided to cross the road and avoid him. He crossed it and caught up with me. 'Have you ever been to Israel?' he said without any preamble. 'I want to become a volunteer.'

He was English, from Portsmouth, and in his fifties. I asked him why he wanted to become a volunteer at his age. He said he was being hounded by MI5 and the CIA. 'They can read my mind,' he said. I asked him why they'd be interested in what he was thinking. He couldn't answer that, but said it had been going on for years.

He'd written to the Prime Minister and the President. He didn't know what else to do. He didn't think it strange that this should be happening to him.

He repeated himself a few times, even asked a few questions twice, but he was generally coherent and sharp. He always had an answer that went with what he'd already said. He appeared healthy, well-fed, much like any white, middle-class tourist. If this was a delusion, it didn't seem to be affecting his ability to move about. I questioned him from the moment he stopped me. He responded quite reasonably, unconcerned that I was just some bloke he'd met on a street in India five minutes earlier.

Looking at his watch he said it was time for lunch. We shook hands and he said he'd be in Pondicherry for a week. He assured me he'd been telling the truth. I never doubted it. As he said it, though, I noticed something appear in his eyes. I'm not sure if I was meant to see it, but I suddenly knew who this really was. It was such an unexpected thing to see that my rational mind immediately told me that it couldn't be true and not to be so silly. I have no idea how he did this, but that was Sukhvir in his eyes. I never saw him again.

My room apparently required spring cleaning, so while Sukhvir arranged this with the two women who worked for him, I went out to find some fruit.

I came across a cart loaded with bananas. Several people were standing by it and eating. As I debated what to get, the man pushed the cart away. He said something I couldn't understand, but I knew it meant I couldn't buy anything. I accepted it and walked away.

As I reached Sukhvir's front door, a thought appeared: 'Go to the breakfast place, but take the road next to the one you usually take.' The impulse felt so real that I was compelled to follow it

there and then.

I'd never walked this way before. It was quite narrow and in need of much repair. About a hundred yards down, I saw a woman leaving her house and on her head was a basket of bananas. She noticed me looking and beckoned me over. The fruit was half the length and twice as fat as the bananas we get in the UK. I later found out that the ones on the cart weren't for sale, but were surplus, given away to locals only.

I was beginning to feel like it was time to go home. Even though Sukhvir invited me to stay as long as I wanted, I bought a ticket which would get me back on Christmas Eve, the day before my birthday.

I'd arrived by bus, but decided to take a taxi to the airport as it was incredibly cheap. I also wanted to make it as simple as possible without having to navigate the chaos and uncertainty of India's public transport system. Sukhvir arranged everything.

When the taxi arrived, Sukhvir came downstairs with me. I put my pack in the boot and turned to say goodbye. He took hold of my hands and said some words in his native language, and as he did, a wave of tingling spread through me. The feeling of joy this brought stayed with me for almost the entire journey.

Chapter 7

The Draft

I MOVED into the bedsit where Debra was living. My intention was to transcribe everything I'd written using a basic word processor; once I found the perfect machine in the sale on Tottenham Court Road, I began working on it during the day.

A friend of Debra's came round to see her. Having not seen each other for a while, they just sat on the bed catching up. I was on the floor, largely ignored. I'd never met Suzy before, and found myself listening to what she said.

She was telling Debra about a violent episode she'd recently been through with her now ex-boyfriend. As I listened, I began to feel exactly what she was describing, as if I'd been through the experience myself. The words she used were the ones I would have chosen to describe what had taken place. Her observations and her attitude mirrored my own.

It took me a while to feel comfortable with this, but the moment I did, the experience shifted. I found myself having a non-verbal conversation with her. It was unlike any form of mental communication I'd heard about. I'd ask a question with my mind, and what she was saying to Debra—which was on a completely different subject, of course—answered me perfectly. It was as if we were speaking on two levels at once: her voice was on one track, and her meaning was on another. It was really strange, yet at the same time felt perfectly natural.

She went home a few hours later. Debra saw her to the door. The moment they left the room, I could feel something was going

to change in me. Debra came back just as it felt as though something really old was entering me. Whatever it was, I felt myself becoming something else. Silent tears ran down my cheeks.

Perhaps because of what happened in Thailand, I could observe myself more objectively this time. My body went through the exact same physical reaction as before: mouth puckering, hands raised to just below my chin, palms down, bent at the wrists, and tingling. But I noticed something else: the area around my solar plexus was pulsating, as if something was entering or emerging from there.

It lasted about ten minutes. Debra sat on the bed watching me the whole time. She told me afterwards that my face changed and I took on the appearance of an old man. I hadn't told her how old I'd been feeling—ancient, almost, as if I was connecting to something that had been waiting a long time to be recognised.

It seemed clear to me that this had something to do with Suzy, so the next morning I asked Debra for her number and called her, even though we hadn't said a word the entire time she was with us. I let the phone ring for ages; it was early on a Sunday morning and I woke her. The moment she realised who it was, she became very defensive and had nothing to say to me. I quickly explained the reason for my call before she could hang up.

Hearing her laugh, then tell me to leave the drugs alone was not what I was expecting her to say. When I told her I only smoked cannabis, she absolutely refused to believe me. She'd shared several joints with Debra.

I suppose I should've been concerned when she later told Debra that the only reason I'd called was to get into her knickers. I wasn't sure why calling might've given me access to what was inside her underwear, but I persevered. I sent her a letter describing what I'd gone through in more detail, but I left something out. I didn't tell her why I wanted her to know. I felt like I loved her, but because of the negative way she'd reacted, I just couldn't mention it.

After printing and binding the first draft of the manuscript, I flew out to Los Angeles with the intention of finding a publisher. I thought, what better place than the so-called New Age capital of the world? I came across a booklet before I left, from an organisation based in San Francisco called Jews for Jesus. Deciding to start there, I made my way to San Francisco on the Greyhound bus and went looking for them the morning after I arrived.

I had no idea where they were based—no map or directions—and yet I walked right there. When the receptionist explained that the Rabbi I'd need to see was out of town, the bubble suddenly burst. I hadn't realised how much I was expecting to meeting him, and my state of mind dropped like a stone. It no longer felt like the continuation of my spiritual journey; it was now just some egotistical activity I'd got myself caught up in. I felt alone and suddenly missed Debra terribly. Feelings of jealousy arose, making me imagine her with someone else. I cut short what was meant to be a six-week stay and went home two days later.

The journey back felt interminable. I had no idea whether Debra would even be at home when I arrived. I no longer had a key. I rang the doorbell; no answer. I'd held the faith that she'd be there right up to this moment. I didn't know what I'd do if I couldn't see her. But before I had to deal with that, Debra came walking round the corner. The fact that she'd turned up just as I needed her to be there felt so meaningful that as soon as we were inside, I sat her down, and in a state of relief and absolute certainty, asked her to marry me.

I'd explained my intention in a letter I'd sent before I left, but I'd arrived back before it, so my proposal came as a shock. She said she'd already accepted this was never going to happen between us. Nevertheless, after she thought for a moment, she said she'd love to marry me, became excited and rushed downstairs to use the phone.

I felt so much better and began to reflect on everything. By the time she came back in, the smile was no longer on my face. In the

space of those few minutes, something had shifted. I realised I'd proposed not out of love, but out of relief—relief that she'd been there when I needed her, relief that I wasn't alone anymore. Marriage wasn't what I wanted, or at least not with her. I honestly felt I wanted to be with Debra when I asked, as much as I was now sure I no longer did.

I hated what I had to do, and the temptation to avoid it was quite strong. I could have let the moment pass, let her believe I meant it, and dealt with the consequences later. But looking at her bright-eyed and happy, I knew I couldn't do that to her. I took a deep breath and told her straight. I knew if I didn't seize the moment, it would become much harder.

When she was ready, she said that one of her calls had been to Suzy. When she'd told her she was getting married, Suzy assumed she was referring to Adam, and had sounded pleased for her. But when she'd said it wasn't Adam, Suzy had thought it must be with a man called Brett, someone Debra had gone out with a few years earlier who was now back on the scene. But when she said no to this too, Suzy suddenly realised to whom she was referring. As far as she was concerned, I'd only just gone.

I asked Debra why Suzy had sounded so surprised to hear it was me. She said that Suzy was under the impression that I wanted to be with her. She was right. I did want to be with Suzy, but I'd just accepted the way Suzy had reacted towards me, and had eliminated her from the possibility of anything else happening between us. In my moment of intense crisis—alone in San Francisco, the disappointment of finding the Rabbi wasn't there, the sudden collapse of my spiritual adventure—I'd reached out to Debra, the only person I felt would be there. I'd mistaken my need for safety for love.

Because Debra had told Suzy she was getting married, and because it was already off, I knew things had gone way beyond my ability to deal with them. I'd made a mess of everything—the proposal, the relationship, the connection with Suzy. I decided I'd better go back to Israel. I would find another kibbutz and create as

much of the original unknown as possible. Perhaps a new set of circumstances would help me discover what I'd clearly lost again. I was running away, but I told myself I was running towards something. But when I told Debra my intention, I couldn't help asking her to come with me.

The moment we arrived at the new kibbutz, I made it clear to everyone that we were only friends. I could already feel the stability I clearly needed and was ready to be alone again.

We were assigned different jobs and spent most of our time around different people, so avoiding her wasn't hard. But if I ever found myself in her company, I said nothing. Even though there were one or two awkward moments, three months went by without a single word between us.

One evening there was a knock on my door. I opened it to find her standing there. After asking how I was, she said she only needed to know one thing: what had she done to make me hate her so much? I didn't hate her and told her so. She seemed relieved. She said she'd decided not to travel with me anymore, and when I said I wanted that too, she looked even more relieved. She filled me in on the latest news from home: Suzy had started seeing Adam.

A few weeks later she left the kibbutz. She went travelling with a Dutch girl, picking apples in France, before settling in Holland, where she worked in a flower shop. It was there she met the man she eventually married.

Chapter 8

Amsterdam

I STOPPED in Amsterdam on my way home. I arrived around midnight, took a train to the city centre, and found a hostel in the red-light district.

I didn't sleep much and went out for a walk quite early. As I past the front desk, the man behind it warned me about going out so early. He said I ought to wait an hour or so, because, as he put it, 'the scum is still on the streets'. I thanked him but carried on anyway.

Cleaning machines were removing the previous night's rubbish. Amsterdam in the morning is not a pretty sight.

Two men began walking with me. One on the left, the other a few paces ahead on the right. The man on the left offered to sell me drugs. I declined. Getting what I wanted was only a matter of finding the nearest coffee shop once they were open. He wouldn't accept my refusal, though, and continued to push. Then he commented on how strong my thighs appeared to be, reaching down and touching me just above the knee. As he did this, his right hand slowly opened the zip of my bag. I caught his hand, smiled out of respect at his attempt at misdirection, then suggested he find someone else to play with. I crossed the road and walked back.

Moments later he caught up with me. He was shouting and swearing, accusing me of accusing him of being a thief and a drug pusher. At first I just ignored him, but I realised he'd lost face in front of his friend, and if I continued to ignore him, he would gain confidence from my silence and things could get out of hand.

He came towards me and his hand went inside his jacket. With no time to think, I stopped, looked him in the eyes, and feeling a powerful force well up from within me, said slowly and with great intention: “MOVE FROM ME!” He literally recoiled several feet; the look of fear on his face was astonishing. Having grown up around the Afro-Caribbean community, using those exact words seemed the most appropriate response, irrespective of the energy behind them. I continued staring at him until he just turned and ran. After putting some distance between us, he called out one final obscenity, showed me his middle finger, and was gone.

I found a coffee shop run by Egyptians. Having not long returned from my final visit to Dahab, it was nice to be around people I liked.

A man sat down next to me. He was British, and said he’d once trained racehorses—although this had been many years earlier—and had been living in Amsterdam for quite some time. He seemed unsure where his life was heading and what he really wanted. I asked him why he didn’t go back to working with horses. He said he’d been away for so long he imagined everyone had forgotten him. There were many young people in the game now and he thought that going back would mean he’d have to start again. I said, ‘Surely a man of your experience would have no problem returning, even if you have been away for a while. You’re older and wiser, and that will always be taken into account.’

He looked at me in silence. I began to feel strange. Our eyes were locked together, and it seemed as though he was becoming someone else. His face suddenly changed. In a flash I knew who he was; it was my father! He seemed just like the man I’d grown up around, and he appeared to be looking at me with love.

My perception suddenly shifted again. This man wasn’t my dad, and for a split second I could see who he really was—not his face,

but something deeper, like I was looking into his soul. Then even that disappeared and I was left feeling shocked. I felt the need to say something, and it came out as, 'I thought you were my dad.' He replied with a wry smile, 'Don't worry, I'm not your father. Sounds like something horrible happened between you.' I didn't say anything else.

He asked me to take a walk with him. We met several people along the way, all of whom asked him to drop by when he was free.

We ended up sitting in another coffee shop. He said he'd need to raise a little money in order to go home. I asked him how much he thought that might be. I gave him twice the figure he'd mentioned. "You're a real gentleman," he said, as he left.

Chapter 9

The Release

I WAS INVITED to move in with my old school friend, Mahesh, who still lived with his parents, his two sisters, his sister-in-law and her baby, their grandmother and sometimes his brother, as well as other frequent visitors, in the family's small, two-bedroom house in Harlesden, North London. There was very little space, and I never slept in the same spot on two consecutive nights, but they made me feel very welcome, making sure there was plenty of extra food every night.

I commuted up to Oxford each weekend to see Fenella, who was attending secretarial college there. But the idea I had of who she was—and my desire to be with her—simply wasn't real. The experience I'd had before she left the kibbutz had felt genuine, at least at first. The feelings that appeared a few weeks later, which prompted me to contact her, were based on an imagined romantic remembrance, coupled with a sense of missing the intimacy I'd become used to. Unfortunately, the claustrophobic surroundings I'd put myself into made me use her as an escape. Even though I had no real feelings for her now, and constantly felt like breaking up when I was with her, each time I remembered what I had to go back to, I carried on seeing her. And the more trapped I felt, the more I wanted sex.

We went out for a drink one evening. Fenella got quite drunk. On the way back she wobbled along the pavement, sometimes almost falling into the road. I'd steady her by holding onto the hood of her coat. I assumed she'd pass out when we got back, and after

she undressed and got into bed, she did just that.

I lay next to her for ages. The feeling of wanting to touch her, completely freely, without her being able to tell me what I could or couldn't do, or when I could or couldn't do it, was really strong. Due to the state of our relationship she'd begun controlling me with her body, making me feel very frustrated.

I started to pull down her knickers. She became aware of me and her hand moved towards mine. I waited a little longer before trying again. She was out cold.

I discovered she had a tampon in, though I was sure she wasn't having her period. But I accepted that this area was out of bounds and focused on the one part of her body she always made out to be very special: her rather large breasts. I just lay next to her, touching her gently, and carried on doing this until I fell asleep.

I woke up a few hours later to find her shivering—she was exactly how I'd left her with the blankets on the floor. I covered her up, no longer needing to touch her; all my desire completely worked out.

The following day was warm and we went to sit in the park. She was quiet and seemed thoughtful. Finally she asked me what had happened the previous night—she said her breasts felt a little tender. I couldn't answer and just sat in silence looking out towards the ongoing cricket match. I felt so embarrassed. I knew I'd taken advantage of her, but I hadn't thought she'd ever know. Now that she'd brought it up I felt awful.

We had an argument when we got back and she asked me to go. I picked up my bag and headed for the door. With tears in her eyes, she wanted to remain friends and gave me a hug. I let her do so without responding. As I left, either the wind or her hand slammed the door behind me.

When I stepped out into the afternoon sunshine I felt devastated. I was sure it was right, our splitting up, but I felt terrible at the way it had occurred. By the time I reached the coach station I was completely absorbed in introspection. I looked at how I'd behaved

throughout our time together and could see where things had gone wrong. At no time did I blame her for anything; I just looked at myself and my actions and let the feeling of pain work its way through me. I didn't fight it, or attempt to avoid it, or try and suppress it; I just accepted that it was necessary.

It was a bank holiday weekend and I hadn't planned on returning until the following day. Fortunately there was a coach about to leave for Victoria station. When we reached Shepherd's Bush, a few miles before the final stop, one of the crew asked if anyone wanted to get off. I knew I'd be able to walk from there, so I did.

I'd been walking for about twenty minutes, accepting the pain and feeling its weight pressing down on me, when it suddenly flew off my shoulders like a flock of birds hearing a gunshot. I felt like I'd just been forgiven! I was completely free of the pain, guilt and anguish I'd been under moments earlier—it was such a relief.

A few minutes later a car passed by. The driver thought he saw someone he hadn't seen in years. After filling up with petrol, he came back to take another look. I was so glad he did that. I'd lost contact with John and had no idea where he was living now. I'd been thinking about him a lot and really wanted to see him again. But London is a big place, and the chance of running into him by accident was extremely remote. I'd accepted that fate would have to step in if it was ever going to happen.

I couldn't explain what had happened. But after everything I'd been feeling, the timing felt impossible to dismiss as mere coincidence.

Part of living with Mahesh seemed to involve driving his family wherever they wanted to go. Most days I'd take them the sixty miles or so to visit an ailing elderly relative—often quite late in the evening, just so they could stay a few minutes before coming straight back.

I was sitting in the front room, tired after a full day's writing, when I heard the family arguing. They did this a lot. Too many strong wills, not enough space.

Mahesh came in looking stressed. He told me we'd be leaving for Crawley in a few minutes. I really didn't feel like driving for two hours and told him I didn't want to go. He looked shocked. This was the first time I'd ever turned down his request for anything. He went back to inform the others, and after more shouting, returned with a compromise: if I drove there, his brother would drive back. But in the short time he'd been away, I'd realised they were expecting me to do this—and that my being there was not unconditional. I wasn't saying I'd never drive them again, just not that night.

The reason it was a problem was that Mahesh's older brother, who was the family's great dictator, resented the fact that even though Mahesh had passed his driving test several months earlier, he had no confidence behind the wheel. Everyone expected him to share the driving now, but as long as I was there he didn't have to. The few times he'd tried, he'd been constantly criticised by them. He never felt he could tell them to shut up, and this pressure stopped him from ever wanting to get behind the wheel.

His mum had always told me I was like a son to her and should treat her home as my own, but after this debacle I felt I had to go. I told his father I was going, only to discover that his brother had told him that if I hadn't gone by the end of the day, he was going to tell me to leave when he came home.

I went to stay with my mother. I really didn't want to, and was deeply unhappy sleeping on the couch in her small one-bedroom flat. She did her best to give me space, often staying out longer than she wanted to, but no matter how much space I had, it was never enough. After a few weeks, I knew I had to go. With just enough money left, I decided to return to India. Perhaps if I immersed myself fully into the spiritual life, I might not want to come back.

I bought a one-way ticket and told nobody of my intention. On the day of the flight, which happened to be my sister's birthday, I just disappeared. I left my word processor on the table, together with my ashtray, remaining tobacco, paper and pen, as if I'd just gone out. A few dirty clothes lay strewn on the floor where I'd left them the night before, with those I didn't need stashed in the back of her wardrobe. I shut the front door, pushed the keys through the letterbox and walked away.

Chapter 10

India Again

MY CONNECTING flight from Delhi was delayed by an air-traffic controllers' strike. Those travelling to Madras had been asked to wait in the departure lounge until another flight became available. Out of a full plane from London via Paris, only five people were going my way. One of those passengers sat next to me. We started talking and he said he was on his way home to see his family. He asked where I was going, and when I said Pondicherry, he looked shocked; that was where his family lived. He said they were driving up to collect him and he asked me to join him, just a little unsure whether there'd be enough room in the car as he didn't know how many relatives would come for the ride.

When I saw the car was full, I said I'd make my own way, but he insisted there'd be room. The two of us sat comfortably on the bench seat next to the driver, while his Mum, aunt and three sisters squeezed into the back. Each of them offering me little fruits or savouries along the way. When we reached Pondicherry, they insisted I visit their house. I never even sat down before they instructed the driver to take me to Sukhvir.

The car pulled up outside. I got out and the driver asked me for a tip. I had no intention of giving him anything as he wasn't my driver. I started to walk away. He raised his fist and said, "I'll hit you!" He was a very slight man. In truth, I hadn't heard him properly, and I leaned in closer, asking him to repeat it. As I did, I realised not only what he'd said, but that I was now challenging him to strike me. That felt weird. I waited a moment longer, then

walked away.

Sukhvir's front door was wide open. I climbed the stairs to find him standing at the top, arms ready to greet me. I hadn't told him I was coming.

I always rolled a joint whenever I smoked hash, crumbling it into a little tobacco. It was how I was introduced to it, and back then we only had this form of cannabis. All the hash smokers I knew were also tobacco smokers, so they always had something to roll with. But I despised cigarettes and would never smoke one on its own; I'd buy loose, aromatic rolling tobacco when I could get it.

In the claustrophobic conditions of Mum's flat, I'd been doubting my experiences. I was no longer sure what I ought to make of them. I'd believed that cannabis had acted as a catalyst—a key to unlocking the door of my perception—but I wasn't sure if this was true anymore. I decided that the only way to discover the truth was to stop using it immediately. I decided not to buy anything once I arrived; instead, I brought the last piece I had left, secreted about my person, to be used only if or when I discovered the answer.

I'd only been there two days when the thought of using it began to drive me crazy; I couldn't get it out of my mind. I'd either have to throw it away or smoke it and accept that I wanted or needed to. I went out for a walk and came across a man selling individual cigarettes by the kerbside. I bought two. I'd made my decision.

The tobacco was the harshest smoke I'd ever inhaled, and after two puffs I felt ill. I lay on the bed staring up at the rotating fan when I felt a presence enter the room. I heard the words: "Come on. Follow me." I really wanted to, but when I tried to move I couldn't. Moments later I was able to, only now the presence had gone. This left me with the feeling that I had to stop smoking once and for all.

I decided to ask for a sign. I thought: 'If I must stop smoking, at least while I'm in India, let the fan that is spinning above my head start squeaking.' The moment I finished thinking this, the fan started squeaking loudly. I stared at it with my mouth open, feeling very humbled at receiving such a clear response.

I got up, grabbed the hash, the remaining tobacco, and the rolling papers, and walked towards the bin. Sukhvir was standing by it watering a plant. Without saying a word, I picked up the lid, slung everything in, noticed his wry grin, then went back to my room, feeling like a huge weight had just lifted off my shoulders.

I was given access to the ashram's library—in particular, the thirteen volumes of the Mother's Agenda, which had just been translated from the original French. Sukhvir had been presented with a set of beautifully bound leather copies. The Agenda detailed her experiences during the final years of her life as she delved, experientially, into the nature of consciousness. 'The Mother' was how everyone referred to her. She was not only Sri Aurobindo's spiritual companion, but after his death, she took over the running of everything, caring for everyone like a mother.

I spent a lot of time sitting with Sukhvir, now that I wasn't living inside my own cannabis-induced altered state. He was well aware of my reasons for using it during my first visit, and had even encouraged me to some degree—or certainly never discouraged me. He was interested to hear about the experience with the fan, and our conversations changed from that point on. We talked on a much deeper level, especially about his own journey.

Sukhvir would be going away for a few weeks. I had no idea where or why. While he was away, I finished the last two volumes of the

Agenda. I loved it. Loved her.

I went to return them when he got back, and as I walked past him, I heard him say, “Are you the Chosen One?” If his intention had been to shock me, he succeeded. This wasn’t even the first time I’d been asked this question, and it wasn’t something I thought I’d ever have to consider again. And yet here I was, living with this spiritual man, and he’d asked me—completely out of the blue. I didn’t say anything and just kept walking.

Debra had asked me this in Thailand, just after witnessing what took place in the hotel room. I had no idea why she thought to do so, but I didn’t get into it with her. Sukhvir was different. His question seemed to legitimise it, making it feel like something I ought to at least look at. I probably should’ve said something to him once I’d thought about it. But I never did, and he never brought it up again.

How could I possibly think about it anyway? Even if there were some truth to it—whatever that might even mean—there was no way my ego would remain uncorrupted if I started to imagine I might be. I felt a lot of things during that Thailand experience, and again in Debra’s bedsit, that I simply could not describe or explain. But to follow that conclusion to its end would have led me down a path others have trodden before. There are probably several ‘Messiahs’ currently residing in mental institutions around the world, and I had no desire to become one of them.

I first met Mahesh when I studied law. We became close friends and he’d often ask me for small amounts of cash, usually just before we met up with friends in a pub, so he could buy a round. His theory was that I’d have bought it anyway, and this made it look like he was getting a round in too.

He was a good man and always shared what he had, yet found it almost impossible to live within his means. Over the years he’d

built up the balance on his credit card, with the bank simply raising the limit whenever he came close to reaching it. He was having trouble making the monthly interest payment, never mind doing anything about reducing the debt. He'd even had the bill sent to me to avoid his father finding out how much was on it. His dad was the principal cardholder and the bill was in his name.

We met for lunch a few days before I left for Israel. He suddenly asked for £3,000 to clear his debt. Just like that. Three thousand pounds. I felt very uncomfortable, but he was my friend and I loved him. Even though it didn't feel right, I disliked the idea of him paying so much interest; I had the money, so I agreed. He was delighted, naturally, and said he'd set up an account and pay in a small amount each month. I left it in his hands.

Two years passed before I saw him again. When I asked how the account was doing, he could only apologise; he hadn't even started it. I was confused. I'd offered a loan, not a gift. Did he think he didn't have to repay it?

Another two years went by, and I was finally running out of money. I sent him a letter asking him for at least £500, or preferably all of it if he could. I did wonder if he might need to take out a loan, but as he'd had a four-year, interest-free, repayment-free loan from his friend, it didn't seem unreasonable. I wouldn't have been asking if I didn't think I needed it. But knowing the state of his credit rating, he might not be able to take out a loan, and that was when I let it go. He was my friend and that was all that mattered. Two months went by, and I heard nothing from him.

I went out to consider my options. Walking along the promenade, I came across one of the stone benches, unusually vacant. It was the first time I had ever sat on one. I stared at the vastness of the ocean and closed my eyes. I started to feel as though something was merging with me. I sat with this feeling for ages. When I opened my eyes, I felt different; I could barely move at first. I finally got myself up, but everything required my total attention; I had to walk back very slowly. I lay down on my bed and went to sleep.

The next day, I knew it was time to go home.

The journey to the airport would have to include the very thing I was able to avoid the last time, as the price of a taxi had gone up substantially. As fate would have it, on the day I left, a bus drivers' strike meant only the dilapidated village buses were running; the comfortable, air-conditioned coach I'd booked was not. After getting a refund, I made my way to the smaller village bus station on the other side of town. It was wet, muddy, and chaotic, teeming with extra passengers displaced by the strike.

The conductor controlled the bus with his bell, constantly directing the passengers. Unbeknownst to me, I was sitting in his seat. Once he'd collected the fares, instead of having me move, he got everyone to slide along so he could squeeze in. It was a bit tight, but better than standing.

The bus stopped at every village, where peddlers with baskets would approach the barred, glassless windows—a few rupees for pretty much anything. Whenever someone came near the conductor, he'd reach out and help himself without paying, which nobody seemed to mind. He then shared whatever he'd grabbed with me, and I shared it with those next to me.

As we approached the outskirts of Madras, I could see the airport to my left in the distance—not close, but definitely within walking distance—and it was obvious the bus wasn't going there. The conductor was dozing, as the next stop was Madras itself and his role was basically over. Without thinking, I nudged him, causing him to jump up and ring the bell, making the bus pull up sharply. Fortunately, everyone—even those standing—was so tightly packed that nobody moved. Those nearest to my backpack retrieved it from the rack, passing it over their heads when even raising their arms wasn't straightforward.

The journey had taken much longer than it should have. Had I

not allowed several extra hours, and had I not noticed the terminal and nudged him, I would never have made it to the airport on time.

Chapter 11

A New Life

My first night back was spent in a budget hotel in the back streets of Paddington, an area seemingly filled with foreign students.

I set about finding somewhere to rent immediately. I saw a room in a shared house and would have taken it if I could have moved in right away, even though the kitchen was pretty grim. Anywhere seemed better than the hotel. I was trying not to let the fear of not finding something influence my decision.

The room in the two-bedroom flat I went to see next was owned by a recently qualified doctor who was now living in rooms at the hospital. She was understandably dubious about letting a bloke with no job and no deposit move in, and so she said she had other people to see and would let me know. I asked if she could give me an answer before I left, wondering if there was something I could do to help her decide. When she hesitated, I suggested she might let her intuition guide her. That was the moment I became her tenant, and I moved in the next day. I said I'd give her the deposit when I had it, and as I'd be claiming unemployment benefit, she needn't worry about the rent.

For the first couple of weeks she came back at the weekend, but once she was comfortable with me, I hardly saw her. This left me alone in what was effectively my own flat, unless her mum happened to be visiting and stayed in her room.

A few weeks later, after several applications and one unsuccessful interview, I went for an interview at John Bell & Croydon, a

huge pharmacy behind Oxford Street. The meeting went well and I was told to expect a call at the end of the week. When I heard nothing, I phoned and left a message and, after waiting in all morning, called one last time. I got through to the general manager this time and he asked me to come in for a second interview with the floor manager I'd be working under. He said I'd need to be more formally dressed this time as I'd worn jeans—the only trousers I had. I'd explained my situation when I saw him pulling a face, helping him to let go of his preconceptions about the kind of material that should cover a candidate's lower half.

Even though it meant using almost all my remaining money, I bought a cheap suit. The South African manager offered me the job, and I was to start on Monday. I felt immensely relieved that I'd be able to pay my rent without having to rely on benefits.

I went home, made something to eat, then went to sit in the library. I wasn't able to join yet as I couldn't provide proof of address, so I just continued with whatever I was reading if it was still there. On the way, I passed a bank with three cash machines. I noticed a man walk quickly away from the furthest one, and a moment later the shutter opened with a clunk. Without having to change my stride, I grabbed the notes, crumpling them into my hand without looking.

I meant to catch up with the man and return what was his, but I found myself remaining ten feet behind him instead. I had the strangest feeling that I'd just received a gift; I was down to my last few pounds and wouldn't be paid until the end of the month. When we finally reached the end of the road, I lost sight of him for a moment as a small group of people obscured my view. There were three ways he could have gone from here. The first was to cross the road at the pedestrian crossing, but only one woman was on it. The second was to turn left and head up the hill, but nobody had gone that way. The third was to turn around and walk back, but he clearly hadn't done that either. With no shops or doorways to step into, he was simply no longer there. The question of what to do with the

money had been decided for me.

I went into the library and sat down. I looked at what was in my hand: £15. It was enough to buy my first week's bus pass, as well as basic food like rice and a few tins of beans and soup. I had just enough to last until payday.

The floor manager offered me a different job from the one I'd originally interviewed for. I was to work as a consultant, helping the elderly and disabled to get what they needed.

I hardly said a word to the staff, preferring to keep quiet and simply observe. This caused a few whispers to start, especially when I'd also sit quietly in the staff room during my lunch break—either meditating with my eyes closed or reading a tiny, pocket-sized copy of Sri Aurobindo's writings.

As time went by and I acquired enough product knowledge, I started to enjoy helping customers find what was best for them. I never tried to sell anything; I only offered advice on what I thought would be right.

The company decided not to allow Christmas decorations to be put up in the staff room. There was to be no Christmas party or any Christmas bonus, and everyone was made to work right to the end of the day on Christmas Eve, except for a chosen few who were favoured and allowed to leave early.

The store sold thousands of products, and since nothing was computerised, I'd often spend ages searching through catalogues and tatty price lists—if I could find them at all—while the customer grew impatient. I solved this rather ingeniously, I thought, by simply charging whatever I imagined the price ought to be. Because I always sounded sure, other staff began to ask me when they didn't know, and much of the time I just made it up. That, and deciding to give a special discount to anyone from the NHS who was there to buy something for work; I'd tell them we were

running a special promotion and would knock off at least 10%.

One elderly woman would come in to find aids for her husband—the type that cost no more than a few pounds. We didn't stock many, but had a catalogue with hundreds more that could be ordered. I'd bring over a chair, give her the catalogue, and let her look through it at her leisure. If she saw something she thought might be useful, I'd order it for her. I didn't want her to leave a deposit, nor did I want her to feel she had to buy it once it arrived; if she decided it wasn't right once she'd seen it, I'd just price it up and stick it on the shelf with the rest of the stock. She'd worry that she was in the way or that someone else might need the catalogue, and would often spend an hour looking through it. Her tiny stature made her seem like a proper little granny to me.

One day she asked me to order something, and I filled out the form, putting her name at the top as usual. I read her details out loud as I wrote everything down, not really thinking, when she said quietly, "That's not my name." Without looking up, I replied almost indignantly, "What do you mean that's not your name?" Not only had I put that name at the top of every order, but ever since her first visit, I'd called her by it too. She said, "My name isn't Anne, it's Lilly."

I suddenly remembered my maternal grandmother who'd died when I was five; she was called Lilly. It wasn't that this woman reminded me of her; it felt as though Nanny was somehow there. I completed the order and gave her a copy. I never saw her again.

I was put in charge of the electric wheelchairs, which were by far the most expensive items the company sold. I called myself "Liaison to the Royal Warrant," because I'd sometimes be required to

take a top-of-the-line chair to the House of Lords and demonstrate it whenever an elderly Peer expressed an interest in acquiring one. I'd drive the chair through the store, out the front doors, and hail a taxi. I'd then leave it with him, and at some point the company received a cheque.

On one occasion, I was asked to grab a few tools and sort out one of his Lordship's wheels which had come loose. Arrangements were made to let me into the antechamber where it was parked. I told the cabby to drive straight in through the gates; the police officer waved us through, and I acknowledged him with a simple wave. I tightened the wheel and put the battery on charge, and then I noticed the novelist Jeffrey Archer's coat peg was right next to me. I had a few luminous stickers with me, intended to help his Lordship work out which footplate went where after they were removed to put the chair into his vehicle. I'd placed a sticker underneath each footplate with L or R on it, and then stuck one right over Archer's nameplate.

I'd met the very patronising Lord Archer many years earlier while working in Berkeley Square. It was after the scandal about him having—allegedly—visited a prostitute in Shepherd Market, and he was there to buy a gift for his wife. I'd sold him a hand-modified, completely unique Mini Cooper, which started off at a basic price of £4,500 and ended up costing him a small fortune once I'd added all the extras I thought a multi-millionaire, buying an apology gift for the embarrassment he'd caused his wife, ought to have. I then sold the story to the News of the World and found myself on the front page handing over the car.

Six months later, I'd taken on so much responsibility that I was basically the manager's assistant. I was given no promotion or pay rise; I just did it because I liked him, although he did say things would change in the future.

My quiet demeanour still bothered some of the staff. I simply wasn't interested in all the gossip that went on, but I wasn't completely silent now either.

Sarah had joined the company a few months before I did, working in the surgical instrument section on the other side of the store. For the first three months, I never said a word to her. She was about to get married, and when she gave out the invitations, I received one to the reception at her local pub.

Leon started around the same time as Sarah. He worked in my section and we spent a lot of time talking. We'd often have to make it look like we were working, as the boss never stopped trying to break us up. I told him all about my time in Israel, and a few months later he quit to become a volunteer on the kibbutz I'd last stayed on. The staff organised a leaving drink in a nearby pub, where I found myself sitting next to Sarah. For the next three hours, we talked about everything we had in common, especially our writing and our philosophy on life. As the evening wore on, the conversation moved onto kids; I told her how I felt about bringing up children, and she agreed.

By the end of the evening, I was thinking about the experience I'd had when I first set eyes on her. I'd heard an internal voice say very clearly: *This woman will be the mother of your child.* Even though I loved the idea of becoming a dad and wanted to know what having a wife would be like, simply because 'a voice' said so didn't mean I just accepted it. I went through the first three months not thinking about it at all; it simply didn't exist for me. Until suddenly there it was again, reminding me and making it feel real in a way I couldn't ignore anymore. But it was clearly too late now; she was married, so that was that.

She came in much earlier the next day; I was usually the first one there. I gave her a poem I'd written the night before. The following day she handed me one of her short stories; the ending was really moving. We went out for a quick drink after work, and she told her husband she'd be late back.

She invited me to her flat a few days later, while her husband went out to the pub. It was a warm evening and we sat in the garden drinking wine. I told her about my travels, especially India, and loved the way she reacted.

Sarah's home was incredibly cluttered; there was so much stuff. She agreed when I brought up the subject, but because she spent so much time in what I'd come to call "Sarah World," she just escaped whenever things got too much. She said it all meant nothing to her anyway. If this was true, I wondered if she could walk away—let it all go? She said she could, except for her grandmother's ring, which she'd want to keep for sentimental reasons.

We went to the pub again the next day. We didn't talk much, just sat quietly, holding hands; it was amazing to feel that something was actually happening.

The following day we were there again. This time we didn't talk or hold hands; instead, kissed passionately. When I walked her to the station, I realised I'd left my keys in my locker and wouldn't be able to get into the flat. Sarah offered to put me up for the night, but as she'd already told me that her husband was accusing her of having an affair, I thought it best to make other arrangements. I walked back to Paddington and took another room amongst the students.

We'd arranged to meet at the station the next morning. I arrived first. Half an hour later Sarah still wasn't there; I knew something was wrong. When she finally appeared, I could see she'd been crying. Her husband, Gary, had come home drunk, convinced she was sleeping with me—an accusation not helped by Sarah no longer wanting sex with him. At some point he lost it. She tried to leave, but as she opened the door to go, he dragged her back inside, throwing her to the floor. I don't know what happened next, but she was clearly in shock. She'd decided to stay with her grandmother.

I was on the sales floor filling up the rotating rack of thermometers when I looked up to see Gary steaming towards me. Even though I should have realised his intention by the expression on his face, my automatic reaction was, “Alright mate?” He pushed me into the thermometers, causing them to spill onto the floor. When I tried to stand up, he pushed me into them again. He then grabbed me by the throat and, with his fist raised, shouted, “Stop fucking my wife. Leave her alone!” I could smell alcohol on his breath.

As I stood there with his fist ready to strike, I said calmly, but with no real expectation of changing his mind, “Don’t do this.” He replied angrily, “Why not?” and pushed me towards the wall, tightening his grip as he did.

The security guard came running over, causing Gary to back off. Sarah, having heard the commotion, came to see what was going on. The moment Gary saw her, he opened his mouth, shouting all manner of nasty things. She just burst into tears. The security guard walked him out of the building, while Gary shouted for Sarah to get him some money. She asked the boss if she could leave to go to a cash point.

We’d made no secret of our friendship, but it wasn’t long before some of the staff had us embroiled in a full-blown affair. On the occasions when we left the building together, snide, sarcastic comments were made, but as it was none of their business, I never felt the need to respond. Except once.

While walking up the stairs from the stockroom, I heard a voice call out, “Are you shagging Sarah, then?” I knew who the voice belonged to. Without looking round, I told him I wasn’t. “I didn’t think you were, but you know what the gossip is, don’t you?” What made me smile was that he was the chief gossiper.

After ejecting Gary, the guard came back to speak to me. “He wants to talk to you. I’ve told him he’s not allowed back in the store. Obviously you don’t have to, but if you do, I’ll be right behind you.” I decided to give Gary the opportunity to say his piece, but instead of staying quiet and letting him set the scene, I said,

“What can I do for you?” It came out sounding smug.

Noticing Sarah walking back, he started shouting at her again. I ushered her to come inside; the store was now a sanctuary, and if she could just cross the threshold, she’d be safe. This stripped away whatever control Gary felt he had left, and he exploded. Reaching in, he grabbed my shirt and pulled me onto the street. I could hear buttons popping off as he threw me to the floor. My passivity seemed to empower him, yet I felt I had to accept whatever was about to happen.

Lying on the pavement with my legs tucked up and my knees firmly together, I waited for the kicks and punches, but nothing happened. When I looked up, I saw the security guard and another member of staff holding back what looked like a wild animal desperate to get at me. The other bloke, Naim—affectionately known as ‘Meat’—was a bodybuilder and a Muslim. Being Jewish, I considered him a brother, and I had told him so.

I got up feeling very odd, as if what was happening had nothing to do with me and was merely a scene in a play. I noticed my watch strap had snapped and bent down to pick it up. I never got there. Naim picked me up and, moving more quickly than should have been possible while carrying a grown man, hauled me past the staff and customers, right to the back of the store as if he were carrying a sack of potatoes. I heard the guard shouting for someone to call the police.

I sat in the tea room waiting for the police to speak to me when a member of staff came in with a message that I should go up to the conference room. When I opened the door, Gary started shouting again. One officer quickly took me outside. “I only want to know one thing,” he said. “How do you feel about this woman?” A particularly nosy member of staff stood just behind him, pretending not to listen.

‘I love her,’ I said, after a short pause.

Apparently, that was all he needed. He asked if I wanted to press charges. I said I didn’t. I knew why Gary had reacted so

strongly; he was losing what he'd thought of as his. The officer said they would arrest him anyway as they wanted to charge him with breaching the peace.

Our boss suggested we go home for the day, and with my trousers torn at the knee, it seemed like a good idea. Sarah had decided to move out and, knowing that Gary was in custody, wanted to do so before he could interfere. She was afraid that if he discovered she'd gone he'd burn her books, so I helped her pack everything up and dropped her at her grandmother's.

A few of the staff were lovely enough to care; most just saw what happened as confirmation of the gossip. We carried on as before, going out to sit in the park at lunchtime, taking any opportunity to be together.

Sarah had asked Gary to give her some space, but he wouldn't. He kept calling her, trying to see her, and did his best to stop her from seeing me. He ordered her not to sit next to me in the staff room, and definitely banned any pub after work. He threatened to get a few boys to 'do me over', so she agreed to his demands simply to keep the situation contained.

As far as work was concerned, it was none of their business. No one said anything to me, and neither of us said anything to them; we behaved as professionally as always.

A few days later, the boss took me aside. He asked me not to sit next to Sarah during our lunch break anymore. Then it became forbidden to hold her hand while in the tea room; people were complaining. Finally, he gave me an ultimatum: "You have to make a choice—work or love?" It wasn't a hard decision.

Having accepted that the voice telling me who Sarah was might not be wrong, I resolved not to indulge the feelings I now had for her. While it was exciting to imagine her being my partner, I felt that desiring her would only interfere with the connection becom-

ing what it needed to be. I had to be sure Sarah truly wanted to change her life. It was never my intention to take her from Gary just because I wanted her to be with me; it was about her choosing to be with me, if that was what she really wanted.

Saturday was our day off this week. Sarah took the first bus over, and that was when she revealed she'd made her decision. To me, that moment became our 'divinely orchestrated arranged marriage'. Instead of making it about my own pleasure, I focused entirely on inviting a daughter to come into our lives.

Sarah told her grandmother she was visiting her aunt for a few days, but we'd planned to spend that time in Glastonbury instead. She told me her marriage no longer meant anything to her. As far as she was concerned, we were together now.

We carried on to the end of the month so we'd get paid, then simply disappeared. She'd told her two closest friends where she was going, and would send her family a letter explaining everything after we arrived. We made our way to Israel, to the kibbutz I'd last stayed on, where my Egyptian friend, Manu, worked in the holiday chalets, and where Leon now was.

We met Manu at the gates. He was very pleased to see me. He let us take a nap in his caravan as we were exhausted. Once suitably refreshed, I found Leon in the volunteers' common room. He looked shocked to see me, but when he saw Sarah, he almost fainted. We found a spot outside and I told them what had happened.

Leon could not believe what I'd done. He thought, based on how things stood before he'd left, that I'd be alone now. He felt sure I'd done the wrong thing. Because I'd been so open with him back at the store, his words hit home. I began to wonder if he might be right, focusing on what I'd lost rather than what I'd gained. Leon hadn't been there very long but he was already involved with one of the kibbutz members, as well as having two volunteer girls staying in his room. He wasn't sleeping with his roommates, but the feeling he got from knowing he could was making him feel powerful.

The kibbutz didn't need additional volunteers, and being there would've messed with Leon's experience anyway, so we went to stay in Jerusalem, where I'd keep in contact with the volunteer office to hear when a kibbutz became available—it was midsummer and hardly straightforward. I chose a hostel in the Arab Quarter of the Old City, having to pay for two beds even though we only slept in one. We even managed to sneak a little sex in when the room was empty, although I was never comfortable knowing we could be disturbed at any moment.

It took about ten days for a place on a new kibbutz to be confirmed, and when the news finally arrived, I felt a great sense of relief. I really needed to settle. I was looking forward to having a new kibbutz experience, this time with Sarah. However, when I stepped onto the bus, ready for the two-hour journey south, something happened. I suddenly felt completely different. It was as if I'd been imagining everything, living as someone else, and had just woken up as myself again. My feelings for Sarah were gone. I tried to say something, but the words wouldn't come out. Regardless of how I felt, I still knew that the child Sarah now carried was the reason we were together.

The kibbutz gave us the use of a caravan, complete with a private shower and a tiny kitchen. It was quiet, sitting on the edge of the cotton fields, away from everyone. I threw myself into work, driving tractors in the hot Israeli sunshine and working as part of a team harvesting the cotton using massive machines. I loved every minute of it, even doing an extra hour or two if they needed someone to cover over lunch. Sarah worked in the kitchen but had contracted salmonella in Jerusalem and remained unwell for ages.

From the moment we arrived, I knew I wanted to be alone again. Unlike with Debra, however, we were clearly a couple, and Sarah was pregnant; I made it difficult for her to be around me, and eventually I couldn't even bear her touching me. Our single beds were pushed together, and we slept naked due to the heat, but if Sarah ever touched me during the night, even accidentally, I

felt compelled to move away. The thought of being physical with her had become simply abhorrent.

However, every so often, because there was also this willing and attractive naked woman lying next to me, I'd get the urge to be with her, and only then could I overcome what had been stopping me. When I made a move towards her, even after everything that had happened, she never turned me away. However, not only would I experience intense testicular pain at the moment of climax, but overwhelming feelings of self-disgust would follow immediately after—as if I'd just woken up to find myself having had sex with my sister.

I tried to understand, but it only got worse. Instead of allowing things to be—as I might have done once—I simply lost myself entirely. It remained like this for almost three months, until the kibbutz discovered Sarah was pregnant and asked us to leave.

Part of me wanted to leave her, but each time I felt close to being able to go, thoughts of my daughter would come into my mind. I could just about feel that while I remained like this, it was better not to do anything until I was sure.

I came closest to leaving when we returned to the UK. No matter how hard things seemed or how low I felt, I did not want to give up, so I resolved to make it work. In order to do this, we'd need to take ourselves away from Sarah's family—at least at first. They were a big influence on her and weren't sure of my motives; she was even being advised to go back to her husband by her Catholic father. So, to have a chance at becoming the parents we'd need to be, she'd have to be away from them for a while. Sarah said she'd always wanted to live in Cornwall, so we made our way to Penzance, right at the end of the line.

It was a cold, wet, late October evening. We found a bed and breakfast near the station. Anyone we spoke to with something to rent

turned us down because we were unemployed. One estate agent even showed us round a one-bedroom flat, but when he discovered that Sarah was pregnant, and we were unemployed, no amount of discussion would persuade him to let us live there.

Sarah went out one afternoon. She found herself on the other side of town and went into another estate agent. Provided we could give him references, he said he'd consider our application. Sarah had no problem with hers. Her friend Bob—the primatologist who had paid for the hotel room on our first night back—gave her an excellent reference. He also gave her the money for the deposit.

I had no idea where I could turn for a reference. I could only think of one person—Mahesh. He worked in the City of London, so a reference from him would carry weight. He gave it to them over the phone the next day while we happened to be sitting in the office. I hadn't spoken to him to say I needed one; in fact, I hadn't spoken to him since sending him that letter from India.

His reference was acceptable and we moved into a one-bedroom furnished flat on the ground floor of a small block, right by the harbour. As the owner would return in six months, they said they'd help us find somewhere else nearer the time. Besides, Emaly would be here by then, and we'd need somewhere a little bigger anyway.

We slept in our sleeping bags on the bare mattress. I hated it, and yet I kept choosing to stay. Sarah hid how this made her feel; she came close to being put on medication, but I never knew any of this at the time. I just made sure we had enough to eat, doing the shopping and the cooking every day.

Sarah wanted to give birth at home, and her mum came down to be with her. When she went into labour, I sat in a chair and just watched. At no time did I feel I could sit with her or hold her hand. When her mum invited me to sit next to her once things be-

came painful, I had to decline. I just couldn't do it. I felt like a hypocrite.

Labour went on all night. Sarah hadn't taken painkillers, nor was she using the gas and air mixture. By six in the morning, still not dilated enough, the midwife felt it best that she go to hospital and called an ambulance. Sarah's mum followed in her car. Our initial reservation about giving birth there had been based on not wanting Emaly to be born into an overly-bright, clinical environment. But the room Sarah was given was quiet and dimly lit. The hospital midwife was lovely.

Sarah was in a lot of pain now. All her reasons for not taking drugs were discarded and she asked for an epidural. It took a while for the anaesthetist to turn up, but once it was done, she was released from what had been almost twenty-four hours of agony. The midwife popped in every so often but basically she left us alone until the last stages.

Since Sarah wasn't using it, I decided to experiment with the gas and air. For almost two hours I kept the mask fixed to my face, only taking it off when the midwife popped her head in. What I liked about it was that my head felt clear thirty seconds after it came off. I would have used it all day, but when Sarah started to deliver, I took up position between her legs, while the midwife and her mum stood either side of her.

Emaly finally arrived. After Sarah held her for a moment, they gave her to me so they could get on with stitching her up. Emaly hardly made a sound, drifting between looking in my direction and sleeping. In that moment, I knew I loved her, and I hoped I'd be able to solve the issues Sarah and I still faced.

Six months later we moved into a two-bedroom flat in the fishing village of Newlyn, at the top of a long, steep hill, with a spectacular view of Mount's Bay and St Michael's Mount through a series of

concertina windows that ran the length of the wall. Sarah slept in the attic room with Emaly while I stayed downstairs in the bedroom. Having that distance helped, but we still weren't talking about what was happening between us.

Eighteen months after this we had to move again. Leaving a furnished flat for a three-bedroom, unfurnished cottage in the small village of St Just, about ten miles away, was a miserable experience, made worse by the relentless rain. It took a few weeks to acquire everything we needed, and then we simply carried on as before—nothing had changed, and Sarah still kept her feelings to herself.

I woke up one morning, about six months later, to find they'd gone. With almost military precision, Sarah had taken Emaly and most of their things and left during the night. We hadn't been speaking for a while, and it was only now that I felt the desire to. For three days, I went through the most intense anguish. I felt so alone; it was as if they'd not just gone but had died, and I'd never see either of them again. The only way I could deal with it was to write down my feelings. I wanted to talk to her, so I wrote as if I was doing that.

I knew I wouldn't be able to stay in the cottage much longer. I'd need to make a decision whether to find a room in Penzance, hoping Sarah wouldn't leave the area, or go back to London and do what I'd done when I came back from India and start again. Opting for the latter would have meant really letting them go, and I wasn't ready to do that.

I also didn't want to get rid of the furniture and kitchen equipment, especially as it had taken such an effort to find, and there were a few personal items of Sarah's that had been too big for her to take. I was tempted to just walk away, but only for a moment.

I answered a call from Sarah's grandmother. Unsurprisingly, she

didn't know Sarah had gone. She offered to pay for the hire of a removal van to collect everything. She surprised me by sending a little cash just for me. It was such a kind gesture. After a few days I felt ready to get the ball rolling.

I contacted the council and explained what had happened. As an unemployed single man I wouldn't get enough benefit to remain in the cottage, so I asked if I could get some kind of dispensation while I looked for somewhere smaller. I was given three months—more than enough time I thought.

Five days later, I was feeling a lot better about the situation. I was just making plans to visit a friend in London when the phone rang; it was Sarah. She wanted to talk. I asked her to come straight over.

It was such a relief to have them back again. Sarah said she'd met an Israeli woman. I could see they'd been helping each other and was glad she'd had someone to talk to. Once the people who ran the shelter realised we were back in contact—as they had a strict rule that no men should visit or even know the location—Sarah was asked to leave. She moved back in and we agreed to sleep in separate rooms.

Because I felt close to her again, I had to deal with the feeling of wanting to be with her, without being able to do anything about it. We'd been hugging a lot, but that just wasn't enough. I made an approach one evening, but calmly, and for the first time, she told me she didn't want sex. I was disappointed but not hurt, and accepted her decision. A few days later we did make love, and for the next few months, things were better than they'd ever been.

I still wasn't finding a proper outlet for my energy, or feeling I had enough space. And, just like before, Sarah wasn't revealing how this affected her, until one day I lost my temper over something trivial and shouted, frightening Emaly.

Sarah asked me to go. I turned to my two-year-old and asked if she wanted me to go, too. She said she did. I couldn't believe it. I repeated my question just in case she hadn't fully understood: "If I

go, I won't be your Dad anymore." Sarah quickly added: "For now." Emaly still said she wanted me to go.

I'd just finished preparing the evening meal. I put everything away quietly without saying a word. Then, as I walked past Sarah, who was sitting at the table with Emaly on her lap, I said slowly and with real intent: 'Consider me gone.' Sarah burst into tears. I went up to my bedroom and closed the door. I cried my eyes out. I knew I had to go now, and even though I felt awful, I was ready.

Emaly had been invited to a birthday party and they left shortly after. I abandoned the idea of leaving right away as an intense anguish enveloped me. I opened myself to it, feeling like it would help me to leave when the time came. As they'd be gone for several hours, I decided to use the silence to see if I could find an answer. I decided to stay in the chair until I did.

Over the next six hours, I experienced what I can only describe as a cleansing. While it was nothing like the Thailand experience, when it was over, I felt like I could no longer speak. I suddenly realised how my silence would open up a whole new way of interacting with Sarah; writing my thoughts instead of speaking them, I'd be able to reveal myself without frustration creeping into my voice when she didn't understand me. By writing down my feelings rather than using my voice, my tone wouldn't overwhelm her either. A sense of tranquillity had now replaced my earlier emotional turbulence. I felt calm and centred.

It was dark by the time they got back. I hadn't moved from the chair so no lights were on. I knew if I remained where I was Sarah would assume I'd gone. I wanted to see what she'd do. I was prepared to stay there as long as it took, even if it meant wetting myself.

An hour later, once Emaly was in bed, I heard her call her dad. I couldn't hear what she said and didn't really need to, but I did hear her say I'd gone. That was when I knew I'd been quiet long enough. I took a piece of paper and wrote the words: "I cannot speak." I made my way downstairs. Sarah was sitting by the fire

and I handed her the note. She hadn't even considered I might still be upstairs. After reading the note she asked, "Do you want to?" I knew I no longer could—I started to cry. We held each other.

I *asked* Sarah to tell me everything she was feeling, remaining very still before writing my reply. We slowly and meticulously brought to the surface everything that was bothering us, taking the time to explore whatever came up. It was intriguing to see where we could go with this, and I discovered how effective my silence was. Sarah was actually understanding me.

I went about my days as before, only this time in silence. I went to the shops in silence, and signed on to receive my benefits in silence. I found it strange at first, but soon got used to it. For the first time, I no longer felt like I was being misunderstood. I carried a pen and notebook in case I needed to write something, but never used it.

By the end of the week, I felt ready to speak again. I grew impatient with Sarah for a moment, but without voicing it, had to write frantically in order to convey what I wanted to say. Fortunately, because Sarah couldn't hear my tone, she wasn't affected by my irritation, and what I wrote read much more gently because none of my frustration was contained in the words.

We carried on with our therapy each evening, and no matter how frustrated I might have felt during the day, I quickly became present again. I knew I would have to speak soon, however, and I really wanted Sarah to want me to; we spent an evening discussing it.

Finally, I said a few words. It was strange to hear my voice again, and at first, it was quite an effort to say even the simplest of things. It was a relief not to have to write anymore, but more importantly, I no longer felt the need to talk so much either.

In the fields of a farm in East Cornwall, a three-day 'convergence'

was taking place for those exploring various New Age ideas. It was an event Sarah wanted to attend.

It started pouring the moment we arrived. While she set about putting up our tent, Emaly and I took shelter in the barn, where she joined in with the dancing. She was only six at the time. I sat in the kitchen area and watched.

Several farm workers sat round the table smoking cannabis. I asked if it was home-grown, and a man nodded and offered me a pipe. I quickly relaxed into a very comfortable high.

It wasn't long before everyone left, and I sat watching a woman gently dancing to her own music. Emaly was moving around her, and at first, this annoyed her. Eventually, the woman included her in the movement. Once I heard the dancer laugh, I knew Emaly had been accepted. Sarah came to get us and we made our way to the tent.

In the camping field stood a yurt that I'd come to think of as the smoker's tent; this was where most of the cannabis was consumed. It had a large wood burner and was very warm. It also felt very masculine. Straw had been spread liberally over the ground, with two large bales on either side to sit on. There were no rules about taking shoes off, so anyone could come and go as they pleased.

I went in a few times, never speaking, not even really listening —just sitting on my own enjoying the warmth. I wasn't expecting to be included, but it did feel a little isolating nevertheless.

In contrast to the yurt, the tepee right next to it was definitely feminine. It was clean and cosy, with mats, cushions and soft fluffy rugs, and you definitely couldn't go in with muddy boots on. I didn't go inside for ages, as I didn't want to take my boots off; instead, I'd occasionally peer through the flap to see what was going on.

The evening meal was served from a food tent. If you wanted to eat, you bought a ticket. The first time I collected my food I asked for salt, which they didn't have. Fortunately, the man standing behind me offered me the use of his. This sparked off a discussion

about the issues around salt. I happen to like salt with my food and because someone had even felt to bring his own, other people soon began asking him for it. He ended up leaving it on the table. By the next day, a large salt shaker was available for everyone.

We'd been asked not to go up to the communal house, where those who worked the farm lived. I decided to venture up anyway. I noticed a few people through the kitchen window and paused outside the front door, deciding whether to say something or just walk in. Somebody noticed me; I probably looked a little lost, and just as he was about to say something, I raised my hand in greeting, opened the front door as if I knew exactly where I was going, and confidently walked in.

There were many coats hanging on pegs inside the door, with a noticeboard covered with personal messages next to them. I saw several doors ahead of me, all of which were closed, except for the last one, right at the end of the corridor.

I stood inside the doorway and saw people staring at a television. Somebody noticed me and invited me to sit. There was barely any space, but I managed to squeeze myself into the only possible gap. Not a word was being said by anyone—they just sat staring at what was on. Their silence didn't feel unwelcome; if I wanted to be there I could, but it didn't matter to them either way. The man who invited me to sit was the one who'd offered me the cannabis when I first arrived.

I was sitting by the outdoor fire. It was early afternoon, the rain had finally stopped, and I was feeling particularly isolated. Apart from Sarah and Emaly, nobody had said a word to me.

Three young girls came over and asked if they could paint my face. I loved how they could just approach this silent adult sitting on his own. I said they could, and the older one asked me what I'd like. I asked what she could do, and she said she could draw a but-

terfly, a flower, or a question mark. A question mark seemed perfect. It didn't take long.

The moment she finished, I suddenly became emotional. These girls had touched me with their lives, and even though it was only brief, it overwhelmed me. I burst into tears, which made them back away, unsure why a grown-up would suddenly start crying. Sarah was beside me moments later. I put my head on her shoulder and just let go.

I've never been afraid to cry, but it doesn't happen often, and not usually so publicly. There were times when I could feel people watching. It didn't matter. I just had to let it out, and completely accepted that I both could and would. Sarah took a tissue and wiped my tears, and even my nose. I didn't find it embarrassing; I felt like a helpless child anyway.

Sarah left me alone once I'd stopped. I could feel myself becoming lighter and lighter, reconnecting with the 'old man' presence I'd experienced back in Debra's bedsit. It felt as if not only had this moment been coming for ages, but it had been the very thing I'd been working towards this whole time. Then I heard Emaly's voice. I smiled as the love I have for her flooded in, but then I began to cry again as I realised I was in the process of losing her. In that moment, I knew I had to let them go.

Sarah diverted Emaly's attention, and the experience took over once more. As I struggled to reconcile the two aspects of my awareness, sitting and wondering what would happen next, I heard a child cry out in distress. Suddenly, I knew it was Emaly! I stood up and saw her struggling after having climbed onto an old tractor. I went over and helped her off, hugged her, and then Sarah took her from me. The 'old man' experience was over.

The next day, sitting by the fire again, the three girls came tentatively towards me. I could see an adult waiting nearby. The girl who'd drawn the question mark asked, "You know yesterday, when we painted your face, why did you cry?" I told her I'd been overwhelmed by their attention and that what she'd done had been real-

ly lovely. She asked if I meant joy. I said I did, and they skipped away in a state of complete understanding.

Emaly was on my shoulders as I walked towards the beach. I hadn't intended to go, but she'd been up there while Sarah was getting ready to take her, and I found myself drifting along with them. The group of mothers were already well ahead because I was moving so slowly, leaving the three of us alone in the woods. We reached a point that required a more careful descent, and I suddenly knew I didn't want to go any further.

As I put Emaly down, I knew I couldn't carry on living like this; I felt certain I was about to move into another life by literally walking away. Grief welled up as I felt my love for them. It didn't feel as though I were just going back to the camp; there was an absolute finality to what was about to happen.

I didn't feel I could go without saying something, but Emaly was urging Sarah to carry on, so she picked her up and put her onto her shoulders. I gave Sarah a hug. Emaly reached down and put her arm around me too.

'Is there anything you'd like to say to me?' I asked. Sarah looked at me questioningly, not understanding what I meant. 'So there's nothing we need to say to each other?' I was moments away from leaving them.

Sarah could feel that something was wrong, as could Emaly, and they both started to cry. They told me they didn't want me to go. I could feel the moment slipping away, so I quickly lied: 'It's alright. I'll see you back at the camp.' As I walked away, I felt a profound sense of release, and the certainty that I'd never see either of them again.

I now felt a deep sense of aloneness. I'd only walked a short distance when I saw the trail leading back to the camp. I paused, instinctively wanting to move towards what felt familiar, but then I

realised that if I carried on into the dense forest, towards the unknown, I'd find what I was looking for. I needed to do this more than anything.

I began to speak out loud, which helped me deal with the fear that was lurking nearby. "Well, I don't know what I'm doing, but I seem to be doing it anyway. I'm in your hands now, and you'll have to show me where I'm meant to go." I tried not to project myself into any specific future. I just wanted to surrender to whatever that might be.

I noticed the top of a second tepee sticking out above the trees. I had no idea there was another one, but felt sure someone would be inside. As I approached, it seemed almost magical, giving off a faint, shimmering aura. It was as if I'd embarked upon a sacred quest, with each step bringing me closer to a moment I needed to have.

I found the opening and put my head through the flap. In the centre was a large wood burner surrounded by the melted remains of many candles, with several incense holders and an almost tangible feeling of purity. There were mats and cushions laid out in a circle, with one huge cushion opposite the entrance. I took off my boots and went in.

One woman was in there. I was tempted to sit on the big cushion—it felt like a throne to me—but instead I sat opposite her, although as the tepee was quite big, opposite her was still thirty feet away. After a minute of silence, I said, 'I've just been through a really strange experience and need to talk about it.' At first nothing happened, then she got up and sat next to me.

When we first arrived, our friend who'd brought us had attempted to drive her small car up a path only suitable for off-road vehicles, and it couldn't make it. Sitting under a tree nearby was a woman who confirmed we were in the right place.

When I later entered the barn, I saw a woman sitting on her own in the corner. We made eye contact. I saw something in her eyes, although I didn't understand what it was. Now, I realised the-

se two women were the same person. I felt an instant connection, as if I not only knew her, but had been missing her for ages.

She told me she'd been living with what she called her 'tribe' in Australia. She'd been there four years and hadn't long been back. I liked the sound of this and wondered how I might go there, but when I spoke of it, she just burst into tears. She said she'd been feeling deeply isolated. She'd tried making connections, yet no one wanted to connect with her. I knew the feeling. She started to cry again, and we hugged.

I found myself looking deeply into her eyes. I didn't know whether she was waiting, wanting, or hoping I'd do something, and there was a moment when I wondered whether she was going to kiss me. But after a few minutes without anything happening, she said she had to go as she was taking a workshop. We said we'd speak again later.

In a romantic films, when the two leads finally get together—when they realise the other person is who they've been looking for—there's a moment, a pause, as they stare into each other's eyes, and then they kiss. It seems perfectly natural and straightforward. I'd felt something so profound that all I could do was surrender to the overwhelming feeling that meeting her had brought. Under normal circumstances, for anything else to happen, the woman usually had to initiate it, or at least make it clear that I could; I'd rarely been able to act any other way.

When I became an adult, sex usually came with a fear of unwanted pregnancy, even though some precautions were taken. But there was always something missing from these encounters. I remember one occasion when my girlfriend's late period was assumed to be something more, and the feeling of terror I lived with for the two days it lasted was almost unbearable. In my relationships, the initial euphoria of being 'in love' was always replaced by a more functional routine. Intimacy became about what I liked, what she liked, finding the right time, taking an opportunity, trying different things, relieving a stressful day, or making up after a

fight.

Conception isn't always planned and often just happens, whether it comes as a nice surprise or not. This seems fairly typical. People do say that the spark goes out of relationships fairly quickly, as far as wanting to make love is concerned, and the couple just get on with being a couple—or, at some point, they break up. With Sarah, once Emaly was conceived, the feeling of wanting to make love—which had seemed so important in that moment—had done its job and was no longer needed. I remember Sarah having an insight right afterwards; she wondered if we should now live as brother and sister.

But sex had always been an intoxicating experience for me, especially as I'd had to wait so long to have it. After finally experiencing it again after a long period of abstinence, I definitely wanted to continue doing it. I ignored what I recognised as being right, and just assumed continuing to have sex for pleasure wouldn't be a problem.

I saw this woman again just before we left; we exchanged details and kept in touch over the following weeks. I asked Sarah to invite her for the weekend; as she lived a long way away, a day trip was out of the question. I'd just written an account of my experience and gave it to her when she arrived. I still felt the connection, but I simply couldn't bring myself to act on it. Emaly was still so young, and I couldn't abandon her for something that might not even be real.

I'm not sure if she was hoping something might happen; perhaps she was just coming to see if it would. I felt like I loved her, just as I'd felt like I loved Debra's friend, Suzy. She never said anything to me about what she might be feeling. But whatever was going on for her, she lost her temper with me over something trivial the day she was due to leave. I walked her to the bus stop and said

goodbye, but I could see she'd already withdrawn emotionally. I never heard from her again.

In the corner of a tent, in the middle of a field, sits a man. He wears a dark cloak, carries a staff with an animal horn fixed at the top, and has a pair of flying goggles on his forehead. A sign on the table reads: Tarot readings—by donation.

I listen to some of what he says to a woman who is having a reading. It isn't very profound, but she seems happy with it. He occasionally picks up a book, reads a few lines from it, but basically he just talks. He sometimes picks up a half-smoked joint and lights it; he seems really comfortable in his role.

After she goes, the event organiser comes over to tell him how things work—how much she expects to receive as a percentage of what he earns for providing the space in which to do this. Once she leaves, I say something about what she just said. He asks me to join him. He tells me that he does the festival circuit during summer; even though he's really employed by the bar to fetch, carry, and secure the area, his passion is the readings. He says that where he sits—which seems perfect; in the public area but set back and quiet—is not his patch, it's just where he sits. We're in a large bar tent, and this is the second day of a three-day festival.

I get up as someone comes over looking for a reading. When I come back later, his chair is empty; the rain has stopped and everyone has gone outside. I look at where he sits, and even though the book and the cards are still on the table, as if he's simply having a break, he's nowhere to be seen. I feel a desire to sit there, just to see how it feels. At first, I feel like a child who has climbed onto the king's throne. I don't wish to be the king; I just want to sit in his chair.

A woman sits down opposite me. She asks if I'm the one who gives the readings. The sign has been taken off the table and is lean-

ing against a post. Obviously I'm not the one who gives the readings, but what if I don't turn her away?

She isn't alone either. I notice two girlfriends sitting on a nearby sofa, watching, and it turns out they've driven two hundred miles to be here today. I ask her why she wants a reading, and she tells me about herself, her life, her failed marriage, and her children. She's in the process of selling her home, and isn't sure what to do once it's gone. One thing she feels sure about—someone is missing from her life; a partner, a soulmate, and she wants to know if he's coming, and whether she should wait.

I ask her about her kids, whether she's on good terms with their dad, and whether he sees the children. I ask how open she will be when talking about herself, and whether there's anything she isn't comfortable sharing. When she says she will talk about anything, I test her, and she responds to everything I ask, including some deeply personal things.

But it's during a silent moment when I just look at her that I start to feel something unexpected. She holds my gaze, sometimes smiling enigmatically. The silence goes on a lot longer than might typically be comfortable, and eventually, she gently rephrases her original question to bring it back to why she's there, without seeming bothered by having to do so.

She wants me to tell her something, but there's something about this that feels synchronistic. She's very accepting of her life, has no insistence about what ought to happen; she just wants to know if there's anyone who will see her for who she is. It is then that I pick up the cards.

Tarot cards are used as a focus, a means of allowing a moment of inspiration or insight to arise, and I wonder whether they will do that for me. I remove the cards from the cloth and, without shuffling, spread them face down on the table, pulling three at random. I turn over the first card and discover that unlike the decks I've seen before, animals are the visual representations here.

The card inspires me to say something. I speak for a bit, and

when there's nothing left to say, turn over the next card and do the same. Nothing profound comes out, but it sounds reasonable enough. I ask her to choose the next card herself. This creates a slightly clearer speaking, but nothing I'd call flowing, nothing like it matters.

I ask if anything I've said has helped. She says she isn't sure, but adds that I haven't really dealt with the reason she's there. I suddenly pluck a date out of the air, and when she asks what I mean by it, I say there could be changes on that day in connection with her question. This feels like bullshit to me, but I want to continue, so I think I'm improvising now.

I'm also aware of a pulsing in the centre of my chest, just above the solar plexus, and I ask her if she feels anything similar. She says she feels something around her throat. I don't think I can keep doing this, though, because I realise I'm not telling her everything I feel. If I do, it will change things in a way I will not be able to take back, and I don't want to do that unless I really mean it.

She asks how much she should give me for the reading, but I say she doesn't need to give me anything; the sign says by donation, but unlike the man who does this who would want something to come his way, I don't feel I can take anything from her. I'm not telling her what she's come to hear. I'm not telling her what I now know.

I can't say if it's an insight into what might help her, but I ask if she's ever tried cannabis before. This surprises her, and she playfully asks if I'm with the police, even though she's at a festival where people are openly smoking. She says she's never taken an illegal substance, although she'd be interested in trying it. I explain a little about what it is and how she might use it, and she again confirms her interest in doing so. I tell her she can try it right now, and take out my little pipe.

Fear takes hold of her immediately. I can see I've changed things. I quickly smoke a little to show her that it's alright, though I don't offer her any. I feel as if I've messed it up. It's as though

she's now a completely different person, repeating the well-worn rhetoric about the dangers of drugs and revealing herself to be just another closed-minded mouthpiece of the state, telling me how illegal it is, how wrong it is. When I say there's nothing to fear as it's been used for thousands of years, her eyes tell me she knows better. It's just too much to deal with. Whether cannabis was something she might have benefited from, this wasn't the moment to try it. Not even close.

After asking again if she needs to give me something, she finally walks away, and another woman immediately takes her place. If I try it again I may have a better opportunity to be clearer, without all the other stuff getting in the way, but it doesn't feel right. Besides, I'm taking business away from the man who sits here, and this isn't what I wanted to do. I don't have to leave; he's not waiting to sit down—he's on the other side of the tent, laughing and chatting. Even though it might have been interesting to have had another go, I get up and walk away, much to the chagrin of the woman now sitting there.

What didn't I say as I looked into her eyes? I knew the answer to her question about whether she'd find her soulmate. I knew the answer because, in that moment, I knew she'd already found him; she'd been looking at him the whole time she was having the reading. Of course, this was a huge presumption on my part, as she might have reacted to my saying this very differently. But if I had told her, how could she not be affected by it? After all, finding her soulmate was why she was there.

It felt like I'd avoided something I was meant to find. And while I wasn't happy with Sarah, I was still with her. We'd chosen to be together, with all our issues, and for me, we still had to work through them. I could not leave her; I would never cheat or have an affair. To do so would have made me someone else.

I often see things differently after the fact, and had no idea what revealing myself in that moment might have done. I wasn't meant to be sitting in that chair. I wasn't looking for another rela-

tionship, and yet the possibility of exploring something new had found me anyway. I sometimes wonder what it might have been like.

Part Two

Becoming Nobody

Chapter 12

Coming to America

I STARTED TALKING to Greer two years after Sarah and I finally split up. She lived in Chicago, while I was now living in a small camper van. It was early 2016.

I sent a few short videos showing what the area was like, and as she was an Anglophile, the very idea of Cornwall excited her. Once I was sure, I drove myself up to Mum, where I'd be able to leave everything.

When I told Greer I was coming to see her, she was really excited; I couldn't wait to get there. But the difference in price between flying out immediately, in August, and waiting until September, was £700, so I had to wait three weeks. Had I gone right away, I wouldn't have sold the van. The van was my home, my sanctuary. It had given me a way of being by myself, allowing me to discover who I was in my own right. But I felt I was ready to let it go, and turning it back into cash would allow me to move forward without having to come back and deal with it later.

I was very grateful to have the van. Taking care of its mechanical needs kept me grounded, while having it allowed me to experience a simple, reflective life—free to listen to teachings on a daily basis, sometimes for several hours, breaking only for a pee or a bite to eat. Holding onto it 'just in case' it didn't work felt more like an anchor than a lifeline.

I was excited to tell her the van had sold; she had no idea I was even doing this. I felt ready to commit to being with her completely, to discover what it would be like to live with this amazing wom-

an.

As I said the words she went silent for a long moment, then the tone of her voice changed. She left me in no doubt I'd done the wrong thing.

I went for a walk to look at why it now felt she might be right, and I recorded myself as I did as if I were talking to her. It helped put everything into perspective, to get a sense of what her reaction had truly meant. When I got back, I sent it to her.

I'd shared thoughts with her before, and she'd loved receiving them. She didn't finish listening to this one. When she told me she'd stopped before the end, I asked her to please listen to the rest, as I knew the last bit would make a difference. She agreed, and even though she said it did help, something had definitely changed in her.

Telling her I'd given up the van changed things. How could I not, though? I wasn't trying to deceive her, I was just doing what I thought was right. How will I know who I really am if I don't know what it feels like to be him? But the recording had simply magnified her doubts and the red flags continued waving. She'd essentially 'woken up' from the idea that I was the one she'd been waiting for. But there was no going back for me now. The non-refundable ticket was bought, my intention remained the same. I was going to Chicago.

While the ticket was non-refundable, Mum had bought it as a gift—it had been a long time since she'd given me anything—and I think that her doing so was also to ensure I didn't end up staying with her for much longer. I wasn't ready to give up on Greer. I still hoped that once I arrived, things would fall into place. It had felt too real to conclude it had all been little more than a pipe dream.

When I left O'Hare Airport, she wasn't there to meet me. A reply to my text told me she'd be leaving shortly, and asked me not to kiss her when she arrived.

She stopped at a traffic light not long after picking me up, and, seeing me looking at her, asked what I was thinking. I said, "This,"

and kissed her lovingly on the lips. She seemed to like it.

The sofa in her apartment was far too uncomfortable to sleep on, and I was subject to near-constant craziness throughout my first night from her three male cats who wouldn't leave me alone. She said I could share her bed but made sure I understood that nothing was going to happen.

We spent the next day visiting sights, eating out; it was a little awkward at times, but it was nice to finally spend time with her. When we went to bed that night, lying beside her felt a bit like torture; constantly being *teased* by her presence without feeling like I could to do anything about it. I couldn't stop thinking about touching her; it wasn't letting me sleep. Eventually I decided to relieve myself, lightly touching her while she slept as I did.

A few days later we went to a dance club. We sat quietly in the car before she was ready to go in. She introduced me to her group of girlfriends, with one taking me aside to talk to me. That was when I found out more about Greer's history—her homelessness, her vulnerabilities, and why it was really important she wasn't hurt. It was a little uncomfortable having to explain myself, but I still wanted to be with her; it felt like I received her blessing.

I don't often dance to music, but I can if the mood takes me, and I did that night. Suddenly, things felt different—little moments of intimate touching as we moved to our own individual rhythm. This led to a proper kiss when we got back, which hadn't been going for long when she suddenly pushed me away. Apparently I wasn't kissing *her*, only my idea of her. I'd been looking forward to this moment as kissing would likely lead to sex. But her reaction was so unexpected that not only did I not know what she meant by this, I couldn't help but think she might be right. The thought landed like a punch: I realised I was doing it again. I was projecting myself onto her, seeing what I wanted to see, not what was actually there. I just wanted to feel close to her again; I'd never feel like I was with her otherwise. And I really needed to: having blown up my life, I was feeling very insecure. I needed her to want me the way she

had when we first started talking; there was simply no other option for me. Then she demonstrated what a kiss was supposed to be like. While I liked what she did, I couldn't tell what the difference was.

We moved into the bedroom and she made herself available, and I found myself entering her a lot quicker than I meant to. Not only was there no response from her, other than to let it happen, but when I finished, she made sure I understood that nothing had changed. I wasn't to think we were together now, nor expect this to ever happen again.

I'd spent a lot of time 'in her ears' before I arrived; we'd talk for hours while she drove around visiting her clients' cats; hearing the world in the background made it feel all the more real. Going out with her now didn't feel anything like that; she said she couldn't work properly as my presence was too distracting. So I stayed home, went food shopping, and had a hot meal ready for when she came home. She didn't cook for herself and usually picked up take-away.

She wanted me to find somewhere else to live; a hotel was her suggestion, so it would give us time to see where things might go. I knew I didn't want to do that; I'd be constantly thinking about moving back in, and I'd hate having to pay for a hotel. Fortunately, I didn't have to find a better solution, because my friend, Lew—a beautiful mind—together with his partner, Heather, invited me to stay with them in Florida. This not only helped me to accept it was over with Greer, but made me look forward to being somewhere I was actually wanted.

My flight was due to leave in the morning, and Greer had said she'd drop me at the airport. But she'd been talking to her friend who lived in London—the one she'd asked me to meet before I came out. I'd spent the afternoon with him, hiking and smoking cannabis; we got on well, and I enjoyed his company. He called me not long before she came back; he was angry and accused me of forcing myself on her and insisting I sleep in her bed. I knew this

wasn't what I'd done. She came back a few minutes later and said she'd changed her mind about dropping me at the airport. She wanted me to just leave immediately.

I hated having to do that; it was nearly 10 pm. I decided to wait at the airport. I'd meant to grab the box of dates I'd put in the fridge, but I forgot them. I heard her say goodbye as I dragged my suitcase down the metal fire escape. I didn't reply as she closed the back door and locked it. Even though I was looking forward to seeing Lew—I'd be met at the airport, and they were both texting me so I wasn't doing this *alone*—leaving like that was horrible.

Lew had moved in with Heather a few years earlier; it was something she'd been asking him to do for a long time. She had a severely autistic young adult son, and the two youngest of Lew's four young adult kids had moved in not long after, even though there wasn't any room and they were sleeping on the sofas. There was even less room for me, but Lew had insisted they'd figure something out.

After struggling with two cats and a big old dog constantly jumping on me during the night, Heather gave me her son's room to sleep in, while he went to sleep at his grandparents up the road. The room was still his when he came home from daycare, but having a bed at night made me feel a lot better.

The problem was the bedbugs. They hadn't been affecting the boy, but they started feeding on me that night. They deployed several methods to stop them, but nothing made any difference for almost a month. These creatures were a lot bigger than anything I'd experienced before, and I had quite a severe allergic reaction, resulting in large welts appearing, especially on my head. For once, I didn't even notice the mosquito bites. When I spoke to my sister and told her what was happening; she said she'd spoken to Mum, whose reaction had been: "Well, he's not coming back here!" I'm not sure I would've wanted to, but it made me even more grateful to be living with Lew.

Even though the house was cooled from the air-conditioning,

which remained on all day, because the women smoked constantly, everyone just sat in the garage. Fortunately, a powerful floor-standing fan blew constantly, which not only helped with the temperature but kept the mosquitoes from landing.

I'd sit on my upright dining chair dabbing at my skin with a wet flannel, using aloe vera and anti-histamine cream, finding some relief. The circumstances didn't seem to matter: only my state of mind did. Bashar's wisdom was helping me deal with it.

Lew lived with a severe form of epilepsy; powerful grand mal seizures were regular occurrences requiring hours of recovery. After each attack his memory would be wiped. He'd have no idea who anyone was, and would need time to piece himself back together, which he disguised well. This had started happening a decade earlier, when he was thirty-two.

After becoming affected by the way the people in his life were towards him, he'd walked away to be alone in the world; his sister ensuring his mobile phone plan was always paid. He ended up assisting a caretaker at a Jewish girls' summer camp run by Messianic Jews, in upstate New York, deep in the heart of the Catskills. I first came across him on a cannabis forum, and I knew there was something different about him right away. I'd talked about coming to see him a few times; I was just never sure I was ready to make the journey.

I'd only just been to London to see Emaly. I went to put her mind at ease, so that if she remained unhappy with her decision to pursue a nursing degree after a few more weeks, she'd know it would be alright to leave and rethink what she wanted. She'd settled on nursing to be near her boyfriend's university—only to find out he was cheating on her and was no longer in her life. I'd had the money and the time to go to the States, but it took Emaly's situation to get me moving. I knew that being so much closer to the airport—I wouldn't simply return to Penzance.

I'd surprised her when I told her I was on the train; she'd called in tears. I'd literally just gone, driven by a powerful urge to be with

her. The feeling was so strong that I'd grabbed a small backpack, shoved in a few items from the drying rack, went to the station, and bought a one-way ticket for a train that left forty minutes later.

I spent a week with her. She gave me her room to sleep in while she stayed with a girlfriend a few doors down. She now knew she could leave if she wanted to, and was feeling much better about things. I took her out to eat every night; it was the best father-daughter time I'd ever had.

But I found it hard to commit to buying a ticket to New York, though; the feeling that I *had* to suddenly weighed heavily on me. I was imagining I'd have to make my own way to the camp, which seemed incredibly complicated, but Lew removed my issues by confirming he'd get a lift and pick me up.

I watched the tears pool in Emaly's eyes when I said goodbye. I'd also given her the impression that I might not be back; I just couldn't see myself returning after finally letting Sarah go.

It took me ages to pass through immigration. Long lines snaked back and forth, giving the impression I was a lot closer to the end, while a looped video made sure everyone knew just how great America was. It gave me time to think about what I'd need to do if he wasn't there. Had it been in his hands—had he still been allowed to drive—I wouldn't have been concerned. I was just glad I'd remembered to get his number.

I changed a dollar into quarters on arrival, found a payphone, put the money in, and dialled. There was no answer. A recording told me the mailbox had not been set up so I couldn't leave a message. The call ended; no money came back.

Lew's absence was making me anxious; I could feel myself holding back thoughts that said he wasn't coming. Something was wrong. He hadn't resisted the idea of me coming out, and had even

offered to pick me up, but I had no address for him—I just knew the camp was in the Catskills and that was a vast expanse of wilderness. I'd never find him. This was not what I needed, not at all. Anxiety was fast becoming paranoia, making it hard to remember why I'd even come. I deeply regretted telling Emaly I might not be back; I'd have given anything to still be with her.

During a particularly difficult time with Sarah, I'd reached out to Sukhvir to ask him what he thought; he told me to come and see him. So I did.

I had no idea where I was when I stepped out of the taxi. I'd walked the streets of Pondicherry for months and could go anywhere without thinking, yet I had no idea I was only minutes from his door. I had to find a phone to call him, and he had to send his helper to show me the way. When she turned up on her bike a few minutes later, I suddenly knew I didn't need her—it was obvious where I was. How could I have been so confused?

When I told Sukhvir I was really pleased to receive his invitation, he not only refused to believe he'd invited me but wouldn't even let me finish speaking. I'd never seen him like this; I had to ask him to be quiet just so I could finish a sentence.

Buying the ticket had been difficult too. But I'd accepted Sukhvir's interpretation of the technical issues I kept facing as "negative forces interfering with someone on a spiritual path, and that strength of will was all I'd need to overcome them." Telling me this had sounded like the perfect answer; now that I was there, it felt wrong.

People donated money to cover his living expenses, and one couple—having donated the most—had turned his spare room into a shrine, filling it with neon-coloured plastic flowers. They were coming to stay in it for a week, and I would've had to share with them anyway.

The Ashram still had guest houses, yet none of them could offer me a room for more than a few nights; a festival was about to begin and every room had been booked. When I tried to reserve something for afterwards, I encountered resistance. It wasn't that rooms were unavailable; they simply didn't want to reserve one for me.

Pondicherry felt so different. It was noisier, busier, and undergoing massive building improvements. Even the Ashram seemed different; it was no longer the peaceful, free space I went to sit in. Now, you had to walk round the courtyard, following a roped-off path, doing it their way.

I was able to call Sarah and told her what was happening. She suggested I tell Sukhvir how I was feeling; I wasn't sure this was a good idea, but she was enjoying her time without me and was encouraging me to stay. I decided to try. The moment I started speaking, I knew I'd done the wrong thing. As I explained why I'd need to stay with him because there were simply no rooms available, he refused. He claimed that no one was allowed to stay in the shrine room and that this couple were the only exception—completely forgetting that I'd just slept in that room for three nights. And Sukhvir had also assured me that I'd always have a place with him, and there was plenty of room on the floor in the living area for the sleeping pad to be put out at night. His refusal was clearly more than that. I had no idea where to be once the festival began. He said I could leave my things with him if I wanted to travel around India. It wasn't a bad idea as I'd never done that before. But I hadn't come to be a tourist.

The rainy season still hadn't ended. The temperature never dropped below 28°C, and with the humidity and the ever-present mosquitoes, I was struggling. Provided the overhead fan turned vigorously, I could just about manage to sleep, but during the nightly power cuts, I'd have to stand under the unheated shower just to get relief from the heat and the insects. Last time I was there, I had no attachments, no responsibilities, not even a return ticket to create the idea of a future. I had no idea when, or if, I'd ever leave. I de-

cided I had to go, and discovered I could change my ticket to leave in two days' time.

Now, the urge to meet Lew, to discover who he was, and to ensure Emaly would be okay first, had pushed me right out of my comfort zone. It had forced me to let go of Sarah, and brought me to what was now starting to feel like a huge mistake.

If I could just find a Wi-Fi signal, I could at least send Lew an email; emails always reached his phone. But after looking for and not finding a signal anywhere, the realisation that I'd have to do something I absolutely did not want to do suddenly occurred. I left the terminal with the intention of going into the city to find a coffee shop. Taxis and buses were everywhere—long queues waiting to leave. Noise. So much noise. My mind wasn't working properly; I couldn't think straight. I went back inside, to what at least felt familiar, and saw a man touting his taxi.

"I'm looking for Wi-Fi," I said. "Can you take me somewhere that has free Wi-Fi?" He looked at me like I was mad. "Free Wi-Fi? No. I don't know."

Suddenly it dawned on me—perhaps America didn't offer *free* Wi-Fi. Why didn't I just say 'Wi-Fi'? Why did it have to be free? I'd have to look at that later. Besides, Lew could still be on his way. What if I wasn't there when he turned up? What if I missed him? Perhaps someone would let me use their phone; I couldn't keep losing payphone money hoping he'd pick up. How many times do I call if it doesn't even ring? Maybe my accent would help.

In my best British, I said: "Excuse me. I'm so sorry to bother you. I'm meeting a friend who hasn't turned up. I was wondering if I might use your phone quickly to find out where he is?" Nobody let me. "If I give you his number, would you mind dialling for me?" Nobody wanted to.

I suddenly felt like the little boy who lost his Mum on his first

family holiday abroad. In St Mark's Square, Venice—packed with people, and barely past the height of their knees—I looked around and she was gone. All I could do was cry. I felt close to crying again.

A man behind me suggested I try asking customer service, and to speak to a woman called Jackie. This felt like something I could do.

"Excuse me. Are you Jackie?"

Her 'may I help you' face left her. "I am," she said, tentatively.

"Do you know where I can find Wi-Fi?"

"Well, it's funny you should ask," she said in her Southern drawl. "I've worked here some time now, and it was just the other day someone told me that Dunkin' Donuts has Wi-Fi." She directed me to the other side of the terminal.

I opened my laptop. A signal appeared.

"I'm here…where are you?" The email whooshed away. It didn't take long to get his reply: "Should be leaving shortly. Had to wait for 'tree-hugger' to finish work. Gonna be a couple of hours depending on traffic."

He hadn't even left yet, but it simply didn't matter; I no longer felt I was doing this alone. I made myself comfortable, sampled one of DD's doughy delicacies, feeling more and more like myself.

When I finally got into tree-hugger's messy truck, I took a big pull of the joint Lew offered me, and the airport vanished as if it had never been an issue. Tree-hugger's girlfriend called to check they'd found me and wanted to say hello. All I could say when they passed me the phone was, "Esseff has left the building." This made the boys burst out laughing; I could hear her shouting at them for getting me stoned already. Esseff was the name I used on the forum.

A few hours later, I was standing in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by thousands of acres of trees, outside the gates of a massive holiday camp. It was busy in July and August—when almost four thousand city girls would be there—then it became a ghost

town until the next year. It was the off-season. Lew kept things ticking over: repairing and repainting, stopping the toilets from freezing up over winter, and so on. He lived in the guest rabbi's apartment, but when the camp was active, he moved in with the rest of the staff in the kitchen block.

After tree-hugger drove away, I dropped my bag, and even though it was late and I was exhausted, we went for a walk. The moon was out. This was the only road in or out of the area; no vehicles passed. Lew was clearly excited. I was someone he got on with, someone he could talk to, someone who understood him. He'd walk backwards sometimes, staring at the moon, his face shining. I hadn't expected to go off like this, and it began to feel like this was all we were going to do. We'd talked about walking to Florida along the Appalachian Trail; he wanted me to meet his kids.

He suddenly stopped.

"Gone far enough?" he said. Then added: "Why have you come here?"

Why had I come here? Why was I in the middle of nowhere, in a country I'd never choose to be otherwise, with someone I'd only ever spoken to online? I said something about pushing boundaries, wanting to be tested in ways I'd not been before. It was basically true, but it wasn't my best answer. I was there to find out who he was; to spend time with him and see what that revealed.

"Okay," he said, turning as if to go back. Instead, he left the road and entered the thick, dense darkness of the trees. I followed him without thinking.

It was almost impossible to place my feet as there was so much detritus; yet, even though this was just some random spot a few miles from the camp, Lew walked in as if he knew exactly where he was. He had no problem placing his feet; he moved as smoothly as if he were on a path. I couldn't even come close to keeping up, and when it looked like I was about to lose him, I felt myself panic. The thought of being out here alone at night was not something I

wanted to experience. I called out.

"Gone far enough?" he said, suddenly reappearing without any judgement in his voice. I followed him until we were back on the road.

I could see how comfortable he was. I had none of his confidence; it humbled me. I'd have to trust him. I'd need to learn how to be in his company, to accept him for who he was, and for me to be who I was: the man I'd revealed in my words.

He'd go off during the day to do a job. I'd wander around—so much space, so much silence. It was like discovering the people of a town had all vanished; bikes and toys still lay where they were last used; I was living inside a dream. If I saw an open door, I'd go in and usually found him painting the walls. We'd start talking, continuing one conversation or another as if no time had passed, just like we did textually online; only now, bouncing ideas in real time felt far more powerful.

I was beginning to see Lew, to the point where I had to let go of holding any idea about who this man was. He was the most brilliant diverse mind I'd ever been around. He was very capable, and very aware. Free to do, say, come, go, and act as he wished; while always doing the right thing, always ready to step up and help someone, more than capable of handling himself in a fight. There was something about him that just shone out.

At the end of the day, we'd sit outside smoking *one last bowl*, and that was when we'd be joined by his feline acquaintance. Wild cats lived here. They were slightly larger than the domesticated creatures we know, but looked a lot like them, although you would not want to approach one. I saw one that had been caught and was in a cage; the violent reaction to me even starting to move towards it was visceral. Our visitor however, no bigger than a kitten, would climb right up Lew and sit on his head. She'd clearly done this before. Lew just accepted it. She wasn't allowed to enter the building, though; she lived a wild life.

She'd sometimes climb on me too, right up to my face, peering

into my eyes, her claws digging in. Lew didn't mind the claws, but I always put her down when I felt them. She'd immediately come back up. I'd put her down again, then do it again, and again, and I'd have to keep doing this until, finally accepting she wasn't going to stop, toss her a few feet instead, then again, then again—then a little further—until she finally stopped to preen herself. She didn't seem bothered by any of it.

She'd suddenly appear when I went for my morning walk, right between my legs. I couldn't help kicking her accidentally as she was always so close. She seemed happy to have me there, and I loved having her keep me company. She'd stay with me for ages, sometimes going right round the camp. I'd never experienced anything like it.

I could've stayed in Lew's room; there was a second bed frame already in there and he was happy to drag up another mattress. But there was a second set of rooms right below and I slept there instead. I didn't like being there, and would always be sitting on his sofa before he woke up, meditation music playing from my laptop, which he liked waking up to.

It was obvious we were very different, yet also remarkably similar. I'd taken on a kind of support role that felt more than a little familiar. He didn't have much money, so I bought plenty of food and had him try things that weren't just bread and peanut butter. We spent a lot of time together, as no one wanted much from him—except for the caretaker, Steve. A good-hearted redneck who appreciated not having to do all the jobs he had to do because he had Lew.

I was sitting in Steve's truck one day. He was driving, I was next to him, and Lew was in the back. They were getting a chainsaw to process a tree for firewood. We pulled up outside the tool shed, and as they got out, Steve turned on the radio, and in that moment

I realised I was the woman in this situation. It was such a weird feeling. I didn't want the radio on—I'd been hearing too much country and western music as it was—but it was the kind of thing a gentleman would do when they get out of a vehicle and leave a woman to wait in the car. I could even feel a kind of female energy within me, certainly compared to these alpha males.

Hiking with Lew, tree-hugger, and Kristin, his girlfriend, it suddenly occurred to me that being this remote, if something were to happen to me, nobody would ever know. If I was never heard from again, Sarah would just assume that's how I'd wanted it. I was feeling really odd. I then realised they were only doing what had to be done, and there was nothing I could do about it. I watched Kristin pick up a rock. It still didn't have to end like this; I still had to truly believe it.

During a few close calls with the possibility of death, the instinct to surrender made it feel like the outcome literally changed. So I surrendered to it again, and that was when what had clearly been about to occur became what it had always been: an afternoon hike in the woods.

But now I'm hiking again, and I can feel it about to happen again, and this time it's a lot realer. The first time had been a kind of trial run; I understood why it didn't happen—surrendering had changed it—but the circumstances seemed a lot better this time.

A kind of life review began; the choices I'd made and the thoughts I'd held had all ensured I'd end up here eventually. Being here could feel like being close to heaven and to hell at exactly the same time. I came with fear and found it waiting. I surrendered once more and never went through anything like this again.

A few days later we walked away from the camp; I was now sleeping on one of tree-hugger's and Kristin's two sofas. She was very happy to have us there. I could see she was very attracted to Lew; sometimes she'd even lie on top of him after having spent ages brushing his hair. She did this while her boyfriend (Lew's mate) sat there. He never said a word. Neither did Lew. Lew wasn't tempted by any of her shenanigans, though, which just made her want him even more. It was fascinating to watch—to notice him looking at me with a slight smile, both of us knowing exactly what was going on.

Kristin didn't want me to go, and I really did think about staying. Standing outside the airport, they waited in case I changed my mind. It was obvious Lew and I were good for each other. I just felt I had to go home; I couldn't explain it. My body rescued me by suddenly requiring me to find a toilet. I quickly said goodbye and rushed in, managing to find one just in time. I then discovered the flushing mechanism wasn't working, and had to leave my huge deposit for the next bloke to find.

I sometimes wonder what might've happened had I stayed. Maybe Lew wouldn't be with Heather or his kids now. She clearly adored him and looked after him in a way that really helped him. He was an active father again—something his kids really needed. The fact that his family now felt like my family made my being there what coming to America had all been about.

I started going out early every morning, so I'd be back before it became too hot, having to walk slowly in order to cope with the heat and high humidity. I'd do a four-mile round trip to a huge supermarket called Publix—which was so much nicer than the supermarkets back home—passing through a few poor and predominantly Black neighbourhoods. People would be hanging around outside and would definitely notice me. Regular Floridians are always in-

side; they go from their air-conditioned home to the A/C in the car, and then to the coolness of the shops. These people weren't doing that.

I'd pick up ingredients to make different versions of what became known as 'shit in a pot'. Not only would there be enough for everyone to have, but there'd be plenty of leftovers, making it easy for anyone—but especially Lew—to microwave a bowl. He'd been living on peanut butter and boiled eggs for ages as he wouldn't eat the family's poor diet. Heather was a big woman, and Lew's kids weren't small, although they were definitely lighter since moving in—especially Ashlyn, who'd dropped a hundred pounds due, in part, to an exercise regime he'd implemented.

Lew didn't take the medication the neurologist wanted to prescribe; instead, he kept himself medicated with cannabis—no different from the camp really, although there he had to use it more sparingly. He was constantly reminded to take the cannabis-infused oil he also made—whether he'd already done so that day or not—all of which was costing an extra $700 a month. This was money they simply did not have. He'd do all the household chores and sometimes earn a little cash assisting a mate putting up exterior Christmas-style lights, giving the money straight to Heather. Lew had once been a roofer. Heather took extra shifts, while always looking for ways to ensure they had what they needed.

When I arrived, I gave Heather $300 to get food for the house. What she did was take the three of us out to a diner, which I really enjoyed, but then realised I'd just paid for. I was with her when she did the shopping and watched her fill a trolley with high-fat and sugar processed food, ready meals, and huge bags of snacks, so becoming the cook and buying the ingredients, as well as introducing her to dried fruit and other healthy things, just felt right—the fruit was for me initially as it wasn't cheap. Nobody touched Lew's snacks, so the same rule applied to me. But eventually Heather helped herself as she liked them; Lew's son would often eat the whole bag of tortilla chips I brought out when we played chess. I

decided to make salty popcorn instead; a big bowl would be available every day.

Sometimes I'd get called into the kitchen to find they'd ordered a gigantic New York pizza—my favourite kind—and would tuck in willingly. I wasn't trying to change them, just offer an alternative that I made for them. Of course, eating high-calorie foods made it harder to want my healthier stuff, but it still felt like the right thing as Lew was eating my food every day, and I felt I was making a contribution.

But the money was a problem. I bought an ounce of cannabis, but suddenly having such an abundance made Lew smoke the lot within a week. I didn't stop him, and he made sure my pipe was always full, but I used a fraction of what he did. I could not keep that up. I'd have to start rationing it, and I did not want to be that person. If I was going to live with him, I'd have to ensure our smoking needs were met. If I couldn't trust Heather to spend my money wisely, I'd have to hold the purse strings too. I wasn't willing to do that either. I thought about just giving her money and letting go, like Lew did with his government support cheque. I could see how peaceful he was not having to deal with the world. I wanted that too, but I just couldn't do it, and I started to think about going back to Minnesota to be with Patti again.

I'd spent the previous winter living with Patti, and I knew she wanted me back. Instead of being on our own, I'd suggested we might spend it together. She'd loved the idea. Knowing I'd be sharing her bed, sex would be on the cards. I turned up expecting this would happen, and found her ready; it was the first thing that took place.

It happened again a bit later, but I could already feel something wasn't right. By the third time, I could barely cope with what I now knew to be true: I would never have sex with this woman again. She even looked like my mother from certain angles.

I had no idea how to tell her, so I just refused to have anything to do with her. It made her determined to show me why I didn't need to pull away. She asked to test a theory about what she thought would help. I watched as she set about doing things that would've pleased most men, and yet the entire time I knew this was the last time I'd ever let her. Not only was I never close to finishing, but I took no pleasure from anything she did—even the forty-minute blowjob, done with enthusiasm and skill, had no effect.

She'd been so excited to have me there. She'd let me know that I could do whatever I liked to her, whatever I wanted. What I wanted was to never have sex with her again. While this would make it a lot harder to share her bed, I had to insist.

Whenever she introduced me to friends, I'd stay mostly silent. Not only did this help me to be around people I found difficult to be with, but it made them assume something about me that I later discovered wasn't true—although it did make them treat me in a way I liked, at least at first. Some showed interest in me—my accent definitely helped—the rest weren't sure about me at all. Patti revealed little, and I said almost nothing.

During Thanksgiving dinner at her friend's farmstead in Wisconsin, someone I'd never met before came over to speak to me. I was sitting by the wood burner.

"How long will you be here?" he said as he sat down.

"Here at the farm or in America?" I replied.

"Here… well, both really."

"I don't know how long I'll be here. And I have no idea how long I'll be in America."

"OK," he said. "I'm sorry, but they insisted I come and ask." He got up to let them know.

Patti was definitely neurologically different, but I knew I could be around her. To help me stay with her, she did her best to get me paid to be her companion—money she was being offered by the State to have someone help her with daily life. It didn't succeed.

But I was her companion anyway, and so I just let her decide what we did and where we went, accepting whatever she came up with. I'd be leaving in three months, and my van would be waiting, and that made it easier to deal with her. I never imagined I'd ever want to go back.

When I told her I was ready to come back, she tried to arrange to pick me up, asking a friend to take her on a road trip. I loved this idea, but her friend's husband quickly put a stop to it; not only would her friend be driving the whole way, but it would've taken them several days just to get to me.

Heather didn't want me to go. Not only were they eating better, but I was a near-constant companion for Lew—keeping him safe and keeping him company while she went to work. But I'd been having this niggling feeling that something was going to happen, and if I was there when it did, I wouldn't be able to handle it. I still hoped to find what Lew had found with Heather; I wondered if I might find it with Patti after all.

Lew was no longer the man I'd met at the camp. He was still more than most could see, but he was definitely less than he'd been. Numbed from strong cannabis; free from having to deal with his seizures by himself. I could see how much easier it was for him now. When we were alone, he would still talk with every bit of wisdom and insight he'd always had. But he hadn't been eating properly for a long time, and the intensity of his seizures had taken their toll.

There was one moment when I saw an echo of the man I'd met in the Catskills—and that was the way he dealt with the washing machine.

It started with an idea I had about replacing their worn-out machine with a new second-hand one. Lew mentioned it to his daughter, who said she knew someone giving one away. I imagined having it installed before Heather came home, surprising her with something that washed clothes without tearing them. When they dropped it off, it turned out to be exactly the same model. I now

wanted to have it be installed without telling her anything and see what she made of finding *her* machine suddenly working properly.

It turned out the free one didn't even work. Who gives someone a washing machine without telling them it doesn't work? But, as it happened to be the same model, we decided we should be able to combine the parts that did work into one fully operational machine. Lew set about dismantling it; YouTube had the exact model being taken apart.

Heather had come home long before it was even close to being finished. There was a problem: the non-working machine wasn't exactly the same internally. One part had a completely different fitting. Lew was outside for ages doing something I didn't see. He somehow made the part fit—which should have been impossible considering what it was and how it was made—but in doing so, he created a fully working washing machine. The moment he turned it on, the look on his face said it all. He could still make things happen. I loved seeing him like that.

We talked every day, but only deeply when we were actually alone, which wasn't as often as I'd have liked. We also spent long periods in companionable silence too.

If Heather was ever late back from work, he'd get up and peer outside, clearly unsettled. She was the commander-in-chief who issued orders to her troops. If she hadn't received a text from him by 10:30 each morning, she was calling everyone to check on him.

While the grand mal seizures took him out, the complex partial seizures had him acting out roles like a sleepwalker—sometimes he'd be peeling paint from the bathroom door or cleaning the bath while holding an imaginary cloth. The family would be around him when he did this—all of them if they were there—recording him, only to tease him later about what he'd done.

He never went out without Heather; she just wouldn't let him. She decided what they did and where they went, leaving it until an hour before the park closed to hike, even though hiking had been looked forward to all day; she was just too big to walk for long.

Lew had accepted not being outside, but he could still see some of it through the open side door of the garage. He'd put a few bird feeders in the tree, and would watch from his narrow view. I'd lean over to see what he was looking at sometimes, and yet only he had this view.

On the day of my departure, they were reluctant to leave, holding on until the very last minute. It would take at least an hour to get to the airport, and I'm always anxious to arrive in plenty of time. Fortunately, the roads were empty going out, but I could see they were gridlocked coming back; I felt bad that they'd have to sit in all that. I still technically didn't have to go.

I said goodbye to Heather, gave Lew a hug, and walked away. As I entered departures, I suddenly understood how much my being with them had meant to me. I'd forgotten how much I'd needed them when I had to leave Greer two months earlier. I'd become used to my daily routine of shopping and cooking, sitting with Lew and smoking cannabis, feeling like I was part of the family; I wasn't prepared for the way it would feel having let them go.

I became so overwhelmed by it that it felt like I was doing the wrong thing. I'd let my doubts change everything instead of talking about them. I could've said anything to Lew, and yet I didn't talk about this. I wanted to go even though everything was telling me to stay. I became so affected that I lost all sense of where I was. When I finally made it to the departure board, there was no flight to Minnesota, totally forgetting I was going via Atlanta, which was what I had to head for. It took me a long time to make my way to the right gate; several staff had to assist me.

I sat down and waited for the flight to be called. I felt awful. I almost called them to come back and get me; they wouldn't have gone very far because of the traffic and my call would've pleased everyone. But I didn't do it. I knew I was going to have to accept

my decision. Whatever was about to happen, it would happen in Minnesota. I'd blown my life up, again.

Patti had me picked up by a friend, and I stayed with her and her family my first night back. Patti was well-aware that her living situation was about to drastically change and needed more time to prepare; she was now in a tiny room in a different building, barely large enough for one. I was going to have to sleep on the single mattress on the floor, while she'd lay on several *comforters* on the bed frame. 'Claustrophobic' was an understatement.

A few weeks later, on the morning of my birthday, I received a call from Caleb, Lew's son. Lew had died. He was alone when it happened. I go, and then so does he—seemingly confirming my decision had been wrong. I might not have stopped him from dying, but I would've helped the family in lieu of Lew. He would have wanted that.

His death did explain my niggling feeling, though—that sense that something was going to happen, and I needed to be somewhere else. I'd felt it for weeks. I just hadn't understood what it was telling me. I knew Patti would care about me, but in many ways, I'd have loved to have been there for Heather. And I could've gone back. I even felt Lew around me a few times, especially when I was out in the woods; it wasn't too late. Even when Heather organised everyone to be there during a FaceTime call, had I said "I'll see you soon," my life would have been completely different. Sure, I hated living in Florida, but Lew had a plan to move the family to New York. I could've helped with that.

Heather never tried to pull at me. She just showed me I was wanted—not to step into Lew's shoes, but not too far from them. They'd needed him; they needed me. At least, that's how it seemed at the time.

I later discovered that Heather was psychic. During our last con-

versation, I heard she'd had contact with him; he was still a part of her life. Maybe I wasn't needed after all. Perhaps the idea was right at the time, and I was already being affected by Patti again, but returning would've been another escape. Either way, hearing her say this released me from thinking I should.

Patti moved us into the corner apartment when it became available, and it was a lot bigger. She looked after me while I grieved. She made sure I ate, shared her cannabis, made me feel a part of her life as if I truly belonged. She made sure I knew I'd always have a place with her.

I often walked around the neighbourhood, and sometimes I'd hear a clarinet being played near an open window; I'd sit on the wall outside the building and listen. It was like having a private performance by a professional musician.

That was where I met Ben. He was taking an old RV to New Mexico for the winter. A few months later, still around, I asked him to take me with him when he went. I'd been invited to Colorado—which was on the way—to stay with David, a performing poet I'd met through Patti so that we might collaborate. By the time I reached Colorado, things had changed—there was no longer any room for me. I carried on to Albuquerque, New Mexico, with Ben.

I'm writing this as Ben tries to find another vein to inject the methadone he collects from the clinic at 5:00 am each morning; it's the second time he's injected today. He's not supposed to use a needle. If the clinic knew he did this, they'd only give him enough for a single dose and watch him drink it. It can take him twenty minutes as his veins are shot. He expects me to be completely still while he does this.

It's just as well his parents are supporting him; the RV does seven miles per gallon, as well as constantly drinking oil and power steering fluid. The cost of fluids alone would have made it impossi-

ble otherwise. He has plenty of food, most of which I do not eat—huge slabs of chocolate; sugar in every shape and form. He's as thin as a rake. His parents bought him $500 worth of groceries; most of the cupboards are taken up with sugar.

I found it hard to leave Patti, and was glad I didn't go the night before as planned. I was feeling subdued the whole day, unsure how to process it: waiting, going, not going. Still here yet not here; going yet not gone. When departure was delayed until the morning, I was glad. We watched one last film together.

I'd pull out the bench seat at the back of the RV and turn it into a bed each night, glad I'd been gifted a sheet to lay over the methadone-dribbled, blood-dribbled seat cover. Ben had agreed not to smoke cigarettes in the living area, and he sat in the cab, cracking a window, and blowing the smoke out, after blocking the divider with blankets to stop it from coming back. I appreciated the effort.

I don't think I can stay here much longer. I'm watching him slowly take over. He reacts aggressively when I say something now, not allowing me to speak if he doesn't want to hear it. He tells me what to do and how to do it; nothing is ever good enough. I'm old enough to be his Dad, but he treats me like a child. How and why I do things isn't important, and is often invalidated. Ben just wants to get high. Even though he doesn't have much money, all of it went on cannabis as soon as we crossed into Colorado—the first state on the journey where it's legal for adults to use it recreationally, and these were the most expensive tourist shops too. Everything gets consumed until it's gone. Every bit of sugar; constant consumption.

It wasn't his fault he became addicted to heroin. The medical system refused to prescribe enough pain meds to relieve his Crohn's disease, so he was tempted into buying it as it was the cheapest and easiest way to relieve the pain. But living with an addict, and not losing myself to his paranoia, is hard. He won't entertain any other way of seeing things. I cook, but often cannot wash

up, and things just sit there—and Ben won't do it. Nothing really matters to him. Only getting high matters. Then he starts telling me how to think. I have no way to be anything other than lost; I can feel myself getting worse by the day. He doesn't see how he creates his problems. He doesn't understand why people react badly when he tells them they're doing it wrong and how to do it better. I want to accept him as he is, but I'm not allowed to be who I am. I'm even hiding my cannabis now in case he realises how much I have. I already share plenty.

Ben had brought his motorcycle on a trailer. It needed fixing, so he dropped it off at a garage on the other side of town. I assumed he'd put it back on the trailer when he picked it up, but instead he decided to ride it and just left the RV with me. I wasn't expecting to have to drive—even though I'd done my share of driving coming down even though I suspect I wasn't insured—but I'd taken some cannabis oil and was in no state to get behind the wheel. But he just rode off, and I had no choice but to follow him, having no idea where to go or how to get there otherwise.

I soon lost sight of him as it was rush hour and the roads were packed. I have no idea why he assumed I'd be able to find my way back. As I approached a filling station, I saw him standing on the forecourt staring at the bike. He seemed angry and was clearly trying to work out what had happened to it; I pulled in feeling relieved that having to drive was over. The bike's drive-chain was gone. It should have been obvious when it came off, and yet he had no idea it had. Once he realised it, he spent a long time looking but couldn't find any sign of it.

I told Patti what was going on and how he was affecting me; she told me to come back immediately.

Ben was planning to drive to Colorado to buy cannabis—New Mexico required a medical cannabis card and he didn't have one.

He'd drive the four hours there and expected me to drive back so he could get high. But I'd planned my escape. I'd just need to make it appear unexpected, otherwise he'd have me drive there instead.

As we approached Colorado, I *received* a text telling me I'd be able to stay with David after all. Ben seemed delighted—he'd just told me I had two weeks to find somewhere to live. He dropped me at a train stand on the outskirts of town. I couldn't take all my stuff, but felt relieved as I watched him drive away.

I went into a nearby McDonald's and used the Wi-Fi to book a ticket to Chicago on the next double-decker Amtrak train that stopped there—the journey would be twelve hours—and an overnight bus to St. Paul, Minnesota—eight hours—where I'd finally be met by Patti. I waited in the corner of McDonald's for ages, watching the world go by, feeling relief slowly seep back into my body. I'd escaped. I didn't know what came next, but I knew I wasn't trapped anymore.

I'd only met Justine a few weeks before I went on my adventure. She lived in the lowest room in the building, right by the back door. Unless that door was shut properly it didn't latch; this meant that in winter, when it might be -25°C outside, the small gap this left made it feel like stepping into instant hypothermia. Things warmed up after climbing a few steps, but the difference in temperature was ridiculous. Every room, as well as all public areas, had 24-hour heating throughout winter, making the whole building toasty, and all included in the rent.

Justine wasn't like anyone I'd met before. She knew exactly what she wanted, and she made me feel like she'd found her man. We started spending a lot of time together, and a few months later, I moved in. She was a sandwich delivery driver, but soon became a community support worker, giving up smoking at the same time. She'd been after this job for ages, but now she had it, it drained

her. She required lots of peace and quiet: no drama, nobody wanting anything from her, and nobody making it harder than it needed to be just by being there. She seemed right on the edge.

I'd go shopping, carrying it on my back. I cooked food, washed dishes, walked the dog, and did the laundry; when she came home, we'd enjoy each other. But I was beginning to feel like something was wrong. I'd hang out with Patti during the day. We'd watch films, and sometimes other tenants would join us. I'd sometimes use her ingredients to cook for everyone there.

Right now, Justine is asleep. She's exhausted, dealing with PMS and nicotine withdrawal—she's been using a vape, but it isn't helping; she's becoming very difficult to be with. I'm filled with doubt. I'm not sure how much my being with her is about being with *her*, and how much it's about not being with Patti. I was so happy to finally be sexual with someone I fancied after all this time, having lived with so much resistance to Patti.

But the cracks were starting to show. Things could be great at times—really lovely, actually—but they'd suddenly become horrible. I'd go from "everything is fine" to "everything is wrong," and sometimes so quickly I wasn't always sure what caused it. I had to let go of being the dependant bloke I'd become and return to the man I used to be. I tried to see Justine as my *queen*, and yet a part of me kept resisting it.

It was her idea to get married, to release her fear that I might get deported. Patti encouraged me to get our ring-finger tattoos done—it never happened—and to complete the marriage licence application. She'd be officiating, being an internet-ordained minister.

A couple of neighbours joined us at the public, impromptu spot on the corner of the main road, on the little grassy bit. It was 8:18 pm on the 08/08/18, making the difference between the British and American way of writing the date no longer an issue.

Just before the ceremony began, Patti offered me a hit on her cannabis vape pen. She had a medical cannabis card and could vis-

it any dispensary to buy as much as she wanted; she'd take our orders whenever she went. Within moments of inhaling, I had no choice but to accept what I knew to be true: I could not marry Justine; it would never work. The feeling of making another mistake was so strong I literally had to stop myself from running away there and then. Justine got mad when she saw how stoned I appeared. I was actually in shock.

The ceremony then began, and without taking vows, I was asked if I wanted to marry her and I said "I do".

I wasn't able to do anything that was expected of a newly married man. I knew I couldn't be with her, and yet I'd just agreed to marry her. It took five days before I felt able to consummate it. From all the talk of getting married—the excitement of drawing knots on each other's ring fingers each morning before she went to work—to marrying a woman I couldn't cope with. I tried my best to make allowances for her change in character; I'd let her be horrible to me without reacting, but I was losing myself again. When things worked, it felt like nothing else mattered; when they didn't, it felt like nothing would ever make it right.

Justine had a rescue pit bull, and it was a dangerous animal. It would go for anything smaller than itself when out, while being timid and gentle at home. She called it Shy. The strength needed to curtail the sudden explosion of energy was enormous, and yet I felt I could handle it. Taking her out benefitted both of us.

One day I was sitting on a bench in a small park when a woman using a walking frame came in. Her tiny dog was tied to it, and she was asking people if they'd found her phone. I watched the pit bull staring intensely. I decided to wrap part of the lead around the wrought iron element of the bench so that when she bolted, it would take the strain instead of me. I relaxed.

Suddenly, the dog went for it, but the lead slipped right off the

iron as if it hadn't been there at all. The resulting unexpected jerk pulled the handle right out of my hand. Within seconds, the pit bull had the dog in its mouth and was shaking it violently. The woman was screaming. I jumped on it and started punching it in the head again and again. Eventually, it let her dog go, but the little thing was badly hurt. The woman called out to the two women sitting at the only picnic table to call the police; they said they didn't have their phones with them.

I knew if the cops turned up, not only would they take the dog and put it down—which was probably what it needed—but they'd likely take me too, once my status was discovered. I'd overstayed my visa by two years at this point. All I could do was apologise, saying it wasn't my dog and I was only walking it. But when she insisted I take her to the vet, I knew I couldn't do that. Half-dragging the pit bull, I bolted across the road, hoping authority wouldn't see me.

I made it back, left the dog downstairs, and went up to see Patti. She was almost always in and never locked her door even when she went out. I was wondering whether I should mention it to Justine, when I realised I'd left my bag on the bench and it had everything in it: cash, bank card, passport, cannabis vape… everything. Patti told me to change my T-shirt, put on a different hat, and go back immediately. It had been almost an hour.

As I approached the bench—which faced away from where the incident had occurred—I saw my bag was still there. A woman had tied a hammock between two nearby trees. She said she'd seen the bag and was keeping an eye on it, hoping the owner would come back. I felt so relieved and very humbled by the whole experience.

That evening, Justine took me to see a drive-in movie. I didn't tell her what had happened. I just made up a story to explain why I could barely walk, having pulled muscles in both legs during my escape; she just thought me an idiot for running when I never run.

I stopped taking the dog out after this—initially to avoid being seen, but really because I was just too traumatised. With Patti's

help, she was adopted six months later.

Justine finally quit her stress-inducing job and started working for an online shopping delivery company. She'd visit one of several large supermarkets and do the shopping the customer had ordered via the app, then deliver it to their home, or she'd pick up the bags another member of the team had already shopped and deliver them. I'd help her, making each job finish quicker, allowing her to take more jobs and earn more money. She was always ranked first or second on the leaderboard.

She'd take screenshots of the items she wanted me to find as we entered the store. From opposite ends, we'd work our way towards the centre. I usually found everything on my list, even though the brands were unfamiliar, and almost always of the correct size.

One day, we reached the middle at the same time, but I was still looking for the last item and wasn't sure if it was a medium or a large, so I called out to her. Instead of just telling me, she got angry—really angry—and stormed off. Apparently, calling out in an empty supermarket aisle was unacceptable, hugely embarrassing, and drew attention to her in ways I couldn't even begin to relate to. It seemed totally irrational. Her unexpected reaction was really triggering for me; it reminded me of something Mum would do when I'd do something she didn't like or agree with; she'd act as if I didn't exist, making me feel isolated and alone, often for days at a time. I didn't deal with Justine reacting like this well, and it resulted in an argument. She drove me home, told me to get out, and finished the shift herself.

Sometimes even just the sound of me eating would set her off; normal mouth sounds could elicit angry reactions. I was constantly walking on egg shells.

When I found out that Mum had stage four cancer, and after hearing her tell me she really needed me, I decided to go home. As

a child, Mum asked me several times: “You will look after me when I get old won’t you?” I always said I would, even though I never meant it, just to shut her up. I couldn’t believe I was actually going to do it after all.

I told Justine I was leaving without having told her I was considering it. She didn’t say a word. She just took off her wedding ring and dropped it on the floor. I’d bought rings made of tungsten; silver in colour, not precious, but they’d never tarnish, never scratch; they’d remain the same forever.

Our final week was filled with lots of hugging and crying. We were literally grieving for the loss of something that had seemed so amazing at the beginning, and which I never expected to ever give up—knowing that if I left the country, after having overstayed for so long, I would never be allowed back.

Chapter 13

Caring

HAVING Justine in my life now meant I had to imagine her. We still messaged frequently; only I was here and she was there. It felt like nothing had actually changed—I'd just gone away for a while. I looked forward to receiving her messages; intentionally waking up during the night to spend time with her. It made her still feel like we were together.

I used to play a piece of music when we went to sleep—gentle, meditative sounds that soothed her. She'd sometimes joke that it sounded like knives being sharpened. One night, I sent her a good-night message telling her I was about to 'sharpen the knives', as I was going to listen to that music, but she interpreted this as me having decided to commit suicide! She called me immediately; she was frantic. But I'd turned the ringer off and was listening with headphones, and didn't notice the missed calls and messages until several hours later. By the time I did, she'd already accepted there was nothing she could do. I called her the moment I realised. She was, of course, very relieved to hear from me, but also really angry that she'd had to go through that.

She'd been planning to visit me in the summer. Her only reservation was how much time I'd need to be around Mum, in case I wasn't free to act spontaneously. At first I wasn't sure how I felt about her coming—what with all the things we once did suddenly on the table again, albeit temporarily. I finally said I was looking forward to seeing her, but what I got back was: "I've already let go of coming out this summer."

I wasn't expecting this, and her words really affected me, even though I did understand her reasoning. Then I suddenly saw it differently. What she'd actually said was: "I've already let go of wanting to see you." And with that, I removed my wedding ring. Nothing had changed. We were doing the same things, playing the same games, saying the same words—still holding onto each other, just doing it virtually now.

She'd always affected me anyway; my thoughts often went to her just as they did when I lived with her: always wondering where she might be and looking forward to her coming home. It was making it very hard. I wasn't really *home* yet. So I didn't reply. A day of silence went by. The next day came and went, too. By the third day, it felt like she'd gone, or I'd gone; either way, we were no longer in each other's lives. I could finally get on with focussing on Mum, if I was going to make any difference.

Mum was very thin and looked so much older than when I'd last seen her. She picked me up from Edgware tube station and was so pleased to see me. How different from a few years earlier when her message via my sister had said not to come back.

She told me she had plans for us to visit this person and that, essentially showing them that her son had returned to look after her. She even called Mahesh without telling me she was, saying there was someone who wanted to speak to him, and then just handed me the phone. I should've just walked away. I felt so uncomfortable being put on the spot like that—paraded again as evidence that she was being cared for by her son. I had no idea what to say after all this time. He just said that Mum had kept him informed of my situation, before saying he had to get back to work. It was awkward and happily brief. I felt like a kid again, being wheeled out to perform.

I took her to every hospital appointment, bought and cooked

food when she wasn't able to, and made sure she took her meds. But being around her was beginning to take its toll. I was starting to hate being there. I began spending more and more time in my room—just like I did as a kid—only this time needing earplugs in to attenuate the constant blare of her TV, which was always on and at high volume, either in the living room or in her bedroom overnight. It took months to get her to use headphones—setting up two separate cables in the living room and bedroom so she could simply move from one to the other without having to do anything except plug in. The difference this made to me was enormous. I could now leave my room to go to the loo, or the kitchen to make a sandwich, without being bombarded by noise, especially the adverts, which so often seemed to be playing.

I'd discovered that cannabis could help mediate the side-effects of chemotherapy, and even though she'd been a cigarette smoker for many years, when I offered her my little water pipe for her to try it, she blew out instead of breathing in, flooding the bowl. So I asked my sister to grow a few plants. I'd be able to take the flowers, dry them quickly in the oven, and then make an alcohol tincture which could be added to a drink—a more efficient solution than Lew's coconut oil infusion.

Once the plants reached maturity, I went up for the weekend to process the buds, and to have a break from Mum. When the extraction ethanol arrived, I created the tincture and matured it over a few weeks until it was ready for testing. I didn't yet have the idea to concentrate it by evaporating off most of the alcohol, thereby making the dose just a few drops. I'm sure that adding a much larger amount of alcohol to her tea didn't taste nice and probably explained why she wouldn't take it.

This meant that it became what I suppose it was always going to be: medicine for me. I started taking some every day. It helped a lot, but it also made me yearn for a time when I wouldn't need to be around Mum anymore. I was spending a lot of time outside, either walking the fields or just sitting in the garden, medicated.

I was looking at the stars one night, even though there was a bit too much light pollution. It had been a hot August day. The last vestiges of dusk still lingered—perfect to begin the walk, knowing that not long into it, the light would be gone entirely, especially by the time I reached the woods. It wasn't the first time I'd attempted something like this. That was in Madron, at the Well, near the ancient Celtic chapel.

I'd parked my van in the small lay-by and waited for the dog walkers to finally go. It was just before midnight when I stepped out. I had waterproofs on and set off in the drizzle. I used a torch to help me get there, but as I stood by the Cloutie tree, in the silence, I switched it off and let the darkness envelop me. Then I had a thought: could I walk back without turning it on again? Moving very slowly, I had to stop several times to calm my overactive mind as it tried to mess with me. I kept imagining something was there, as well as worrying that a low-hanging branch might scratch an eye. I heard strange noises, saw weird shadows out of the corner of my eye that I couldn't explain. I made it back to the van unscathed, and felt elated at having done so.

I brought a torch with me this time, but as I'd walked this route many times, I knew there was nothing to watch out for except the odd surface root, maybe. I wanted to experience as much isolation as I could get; plus, the walk would be much longer than Madron, so I brought it just in case.

I entered the ancient right of way through the gate designed to keep horses in, slowing my pace as I could already feel the aloneness I was looking for. I reached the lake, passing the ducks, used to having this time to themselves.

Not noticed until I was upon them, a couple sat on a bench at the end of the path; the man was smoking, causing the faintest of orange glows each time he pulled on it. I wondered if it might be a joint. It didn't smell like it.

By the time I reached the woods, it was dark. I remembered Lew explaining how to get a sense of where the path lay by notic-

ing where the canopy meets overhead; the gap between the trees is always slightly lighter than the foliage and the path lies directly beneath. My mind began to imagine that someone could be lurking around the next bend waiting to pounce on an unsuspecting walker. While this wasn't impossible, it also made no sense as nobody would be out here so late. When I lost my bearings, I flashed the torch briefly, but the light created such a night-blindness that I only did this once. Besides, there was just enough starlight making its way through once my eyes fully adjusted. I walked all the way round and back into the field.

On the left, quite low in the sky, I saw a bright light that I took to be Venus. Then I noticed another light in a different part of the sky… that looked more like Venus. While Venus is bright, it wasn't anywhere near as large or as bright as the first object I'd seen. When I looked back to consider it again, it was gone. The sky was cloudless. I thought nothing more of it.

Back in the garden, I saw the light again, and this time it was moving slowly across my field of vision. I'd seen orbiting satellites making their way across the sky, looking like regular stars in size and brightness—there was no mistaking them once you knew what they were. This was not like that. A plane appeared, its lights blinking—red, green, white—the noise of the engines following soon after, reminding me what an aircraft looks like at night. This wasn't like that either. What it was didn't seem to matter; how it made me feel was what made it special.

I couldn't understand what it was about Mum that made me want to avoid her so much. Whenever I did something with her, it felt like a powerful state of resistance had to be overcome every single time. I was almost overwhelmed by the strength of it sometimes; it made me very irritable and quickly annoyed. I was there to support her. I really did try to make things easier for her because she need-

ed things to be easier. I also knew I couldn't run away anymore—there was simply nowhere to go anyway. I had to be here, and that meant I had to do what she wanted.

Some of my issues came from her fear. If I let her see things that way—because she always saw things that way—I wasn't doing her any favours. She understood me when I explained this and was willing to try it differently. I still did many things her way though, as I got the point of letting her just have it her way; she'd been through a lot.

As I did more and more for her that she couldn't do for herself—things she shouldn't have to worry about—it made her become more and more reliant on me, and that made me feel worse. When she'd ask for a cup of tea, I'd make her one, but I still carried the resistance I'd had as a kid when I was asked to make everyone tea when we had visitors. I didn't like tea and never drank it. I didn't care about putting the kettle on or having a 'cuppa'. Everyone knew how they wanted it, and I felt they shouldn't ask someone who didn't drink it and just make it themselves, every time. I realise now that some of those moments were to get me out of the room so they could say things they didn't want the young boy to hear. As a result of working through all this, I started asking her if she would like a cup without her having to ask me for one, and it felt good to do this without resistance. It reached a point where I'd often just make her tea without having to ask. She started to accept the way I did things and told me many times that she appreciated what I did for her—but that didn't mean she didn't also complain about me to anyone who'd listen.

I walked around the flat slowly and mindfully, and every so often I would unintentionally startle her. I heard her telling someone on the phone once: "He creeps up on me!" She sounded a bit scared. But it was when she'd ask me to do something she didn't need to ask for that really annoyed me. She'd come into the kitchen carrying her bowl of porridge which need reheating as it had gone cold. She'd stand there waiting for me to do it, rather

than putting it into the microwave and pressing ‘start’. But whenever issues arose, they weren’t allowed to fester. I’d tell her what I thought—shout at her sometimes, as did she with me. Only now, she couldn’t impose her perspective on me like she once did.

I’d loved spending time with Justine, but the feeling of having to suppress myself, or experience a near-constant state of conflict—much like it had become with Patti—wasn’t easy. Justine was good at being the boss—she’d even run her own business before—but she wasn’t good at not being in control at home. She often had excellent ideas, so it was easy to go along with her, often without even needing to ask where we were going or why. I liked making her happy because it made things so much easier. But she’d never let me vent my frustrations, literally running out of the room and going to sit in the loo or in her car with the engine running if it was cold. At least with Mum we cleared the air.

My sister arranged for Mum to move into a care home just after the first COVID-19 lockdown was imposed. She tested positive for the virus when she arrived. The clinic she’d been residing in while having radiotherapy performed the test before they discharged her, but they didn’t reveal the result until after she arrived, which resulted in many nurses going home. Nobody was allowed to visit her after this.

The hospital called my sister five days later and asked us to come in right away. While the nurse helped my sister put on protection, I walked in without feeling like I needed it. Mum was lying on the bed with her mouth open; her face was jaundice-yellow. I put my hand over her heart—felt it beat once; then she was gone.

We sat by the bed for over an hour, remembering, crying. I couldn’t imagine what she’d gone through. She’d always feared dying alone, but I had a feeling it hadn’t been quite as she’d imagined. She’d mentioned that while she was in hospital, she’d sensed

her Mum beside her, even feeling the back of her hand stroked on more than one occasion, though nobody else was in the room. It was only when two nursing assistants came in to prepare her for the undertaker that life with Mum was finally over.

Six months later I was now living in a completely empty flat—the contents having been removed a few months earlier—sleeping on a camping mat. Whatever I'd imagined doing now seemed impossible; there was simply nowhere to go and no one left to see. For the first time in my life, no matter how I looked at it, I was going to be homeless. I could feel myself becoming nobody.

While it was still Mum's flat, I felt like a squatter. The electricity and water remained on, although I filled a bucket each morning from the nearby standpipe; it was quiet, and I had somewhere to sleep, but I knew I'd have to go at some point.

I stopped hearing from people. I felt more and more isolated and alone, and started to feel like there was no point carrying on. I thought about Robin Williams and how he'd made his choice; I thought about doing what he did, and the full box of morphine sulphate tablets I'd stashed away would ensure I wouldn't notice. But I also knew it could be several weeks before I'd have to leave, and decided there was no need to take things further right now.

I felt a powerful urge one day to just leave, rather than remain suffering until I had to go. I took a huge dose of the tincture—far more than I'd ever taken before—and just walked away. I got as far as the McDonald's on the main road towards Watford. It was lunchtime and a long line of cars were queuing to get in. The member of staff tasked with keeping everything flowing saw me standing nearby; he left his post, went inside, and came out with a cup of Coke which he handed to me. I really appreciated this unexpected kindness. It started raining soon after, and then it began to pour, with lightning and thunder. It felt like I'd angered *God* by

leaving like this. I went home.

When I tried a second time a few weeks later I was a bit more thoughtful. The weather was dry and I had a bag of dates and a pack of wet wipes with me. I'd consumed an even bigger dose of tincture and walked away in a different direction, getting as far as the Jewish cemetery this time before the doubts hit me. I went in and sat down on one of the benches, certain I could not go any further. I knew I was going to have to wait until I had to go, and *that* would be the time to do so.

Becoming 'nobody' turned strangers into the only people in my life. During a few brief conversations while out, I'd begin to remember I wasn't always nobody. I once took for granted what each day would bring—there might be hopes, dreams, and aspirations—but I didn't have these anymore. There was only a feeling of impending doom, and the best I could do was find a way to live with it. I couldn't insist life went my way now. I eventually stopped looking for an answer and made a poster to stick on the cupboard door: Allow What Is To Be. I looked at it many times. It wasn't really a solution. It was more like a surrender. But sometimes surrender is all that's left.

There were moments of kindness from a neighbour, and a feeling of gratitude came along with them, but I couldn't take anything for granted now. Everything was going to change. How I felt about myself would no longer be determined by who I was with anymore.

I used to feel empowered when I'd tell someone what I thought they ought to know, but I could now see that what I said may not have been what they actually received. Nobody saw what I saw or felt what I felt—certainly not in such an honest and raw state. Whenever I'd record my thoughts, sometimes with a specific person in mind, I'd get really anxious after sending it to them, and it would often have unexpected results. I made many recordings during this time but almost never did anything with them; eventually, I just made them knowing I wasn't going to share any of them. Like

a journal, they were simply for me to process what was going on. I stopped wanting anyone to hear me. Why would I want someone to know what was going on for me when I knew that telling them wouldn't make any difference?

When I record myself talking, I'm essentially revealing who I am. But I may not feel like that person later. The recordings fix my thoughts in stone, and the person who listens—including me—might not even recognise who they're listening to. Assuming I even received a response, what came back often revealed I'd made a mistake in sharing.

I'm clearly not being who I really am when I try and tell people who I am. I'm actually being more of who I am when I stop telling people who I've been while hoping they'll know me as a result. The very act of revealing myself is a kind of performance, even when it feels like I'm speaking from the heart when I do.

Chapter 14

Alone

WHEN I finally had to walk away, I headed for a hostel in Central London. Knowing where I'd be landing helped me so much. I'd tried to go without having a future and I couldn't do it. I only needed to know where I'd be next.

Fortunately, the hostel was operating at half-occupancy due to being locked down, so even though I was in their smallest room, only one person could be in each of the two twin bunks. I was very grateful for the extra space.

The hostel was in a dirty, rundown part of central London, close to Euston Rd. Many homeless people were on the streets in the area. Some were living in tents outside closed department stores on Tottenham Court Rd. Some were just lying where they could.

The area felt soulless, depressing, even though there were many students in the area as there were several medical universities nearby.

A few single women were also staying at the hostel but it was mostly men; single, solitary, mostly young. Were it not for a nearby Lidl, it would've been quite difficult to eat. Most takeaways were closed, making choices limited to McDonald's.

Aside from my daily Lidl walk of 15 minutes each way, I was mostly inside, laying on my bed, using wifi to watch youtube, reading, occasionally recording myself, or just sleeping.

Communal showers and toilets were close by and were regularly checked. I showered outside the usual times as it was often too

busy otherwise.

Snacks and simple meals could be bought in the bar area but they weren't cheap. The staff were friendly which was nice. The price of a bed fluctuated and paying upfront for a week helped keep the price down. I extended by a week twice, but then committed to a month for an even better rate.

I was very grateful to have somewhere that was relatively quiet, in a place that, at a different time in a different season, would have been almost impossible for me to be in due to overcrowding.

Watching things continued to be my main distraction and passed the time, just as it had done in the flat, although obviously mum's flat no longer had WiFi, so I had to go somewhere to download things to watch off-line.

While it would have been nice to feel settled, the hostel was just a way to transition from where I was. And while I was feeling a lot freer from the anxieties and fears that had plagued me, I recognised that they weren't gone—they were just giving me a break.

I felt an underlying sadness at ending up like this, but it was what it was and could be a stepping stone towards something else. I knew how to accept things and deal with challenging situations, so I was already making the best of it.

Compared to how I'd been living in the flat, it was a lot easier than an empty, cold, former home without furniture. But it wasn't really living, it was just existing, and I could see I'd been existing for quite some time.

And while I needed to be settled, I just wasn't ready to do anything more about it. At least I didn't have to escape from another situation I was struggling with. I could still eat well and I began using a carrier bag hanging outside my window as a 'fridge'.

I knew how to be patient. I knew how to live like this. I didn't like the area I was in. Very little green. Not enough trees. I realised how much I'd need to find somewhere better. It all weighed heavily on me. I even regretted blowing my life up when I left the US.

Hard as it was there, at least I had a life. People, friends, family.

It didn't take long to have a moment of grace. Only a small one, but it was unmistakable—a reminder that being there was not such a hostile situation, just unexpectedly different.

Then a major thing occurred. Someone moved into my room. His name was John. He was an American who'd only just arrived with no immediate plan, just a decision to be here. He was like me in many ways, just more capable, more confident—he knew how to use the dark web, used Bitcoin, and had money. But he also seemed paranoid.

We talked a lot. Sometimes for several hours at a time, often about deep things, real things. I loved these conversations. Time would simply fly by. I'd forget about my situation. Be completely present with him. He'd listen to what I said in silence. I did the same for him. Only when it was clear we'd finished did the other one respond.

He'd turn his music up very loud sometimes without worrying about annoying anyone, never mind his roommate, and when a neighbour knocked to complain, he stood his ground aggressively.

Instead of resisting him, I'd stop whatever I was doing and just listen. I actually enjoyed hearing the often played music of Roger Waters. So I returned the favour one evening by sharing a poem I'd written, which he really liked, and then decided to read him the introduction to this book as it was back then. I didn't ask if he wanted to hear it, I just started reading out loud. I thought it would enhance our connection. Instead, it broke it. Whatever happened as a result, he pulled away.

We'd been talking about leaving the hostel and walking together. But I think he realised that my being with him was a way to escape the rawness of being alone. I already felt myself becoming attached to him. And he probably recognised that. After three days,

he moved on.

Meeting John helped me by making me feel like I'd made a deep connection with a kindred spirit, even if it was only for a short time.

I came across a few Hare Krishnas standing on a corner near one of the student accommodations. Every weekday at midday, they'd arrive on a bicycle pulling a trailer. The trailer carried a big pot of something freshly cooked, tasty and hot—alongside a smaller pot of rice, together with some leftover bread rolls collected from various places. There was often some fruit too. I could help myself to the fruit and the rolls, while the food was served to me on a paper plate. I could even come back for more. There was always plenty, and anyone could eat: students, homeless people, hostel dwellers, street cleaners, anyone who wanted a hot meal.

There was nowhere to sit, though. I'd either have to find a bench, or sit on the nearby steps if they weren't wet. Otherwise, I'd sit in one of the squares. I'd see other people walking with their paper plates of food doing the same. I really enjoyed eating like this. I could feel the purity of the food.

They were there every weekday, and it was always vegetarian. I looked forward to it. I didn't need to eat much else, and while I always ate bread, nice peanut butter, and dates for breakfast, I couldn't cook anything as there were no facilities. I didn't need to now. That food—and they piled it on—was plenty.

The second person to become a roommate was a Spanish bus driver who lived in Spain but came to London for a few weeks to work. He'd done this many times. He'd be up late or come back early, depending on his shifts. I made sure to close the door quietly when I

went to the loo during the night as the door always slammed shut otherwise. We hung out a few times. He took me for a pizza. He came back one evening with a box of Kentucky Fried Chicken and chips for me, just out of the blue. Such a kind-hearted man. He even offered to let me ride on his bus—"just get on, you won't have to pay." I really wanted to, but it never happened.

While John had been there three days, the bus driver was there three weeks. When he finally left, no one replaced him. We were approaching the Christmas holidays, so most people were leaving the hostel. I spent Christmas entirely alone. I still knew that at any moment the door could open and somebody would move in. But it never happened.

I'd had two amazing roommates. It could have been a lot worse—someone I didn't get on with, someone who made an already difficult situation harder. The bus driver took my details before he left. He sent me a photo of himself and his wife sitting in their garden having a glass of wine not long after he got back to Spain. He asked me to come and visit him. I never heard from him again after that photo.

The room wasn't the first one I was given.

When I arrived, they put me in with a woman. It wasn't unusual to have mixed rooms, but if there were other rooms available, they didn't usually do so, and this woman had specifically asked not to have a man in her room. Suddenly I turn up and start making my bed. She leaves the room immediately and goes downstairs to speak to the front desk. The woman on the desk comes up and says, "You weren't supposed to be here."

She gave me another room on the other side of the building. I immediately hit it off with the bloke. We had such an interesting conversation. But it was very noisy in there—facing the busy main road, there was constant traffic. I went to the desk and said, "The

toilet is nowhere near my room, and I have to get up several times in the night. Do you have anything closer to the toilet?"

She put me in the room opposite the showers and toilets, where it turned out that the heating didn't work. Which actually turned out to be a much better solution, because the heating would only come on twice a day, so they gave me an electric heater. Now I could have the heating on all day, leaving it on when I went out so I came back to a cosy room. I'd be in there a lot during the day, and it would've been too cold otherwise.

All of this felt like grace. Everything seemed to work in a way that made me feel supported and confirm I could do this. I decided I would stay longer and I wanted to get a better deal. I paid for a month in advance.

Once I did that I felt really present. Like, okay, I live here now. Right. How do I do this?

I started to perfect my routines. I got to know the area. I'd walk to Camden Town, where I discovered a Polish delicatessen selling the same dried sausages I'd found near my mum that I loved. I'd never found anything as nice as those before. And I found the same shop selling the same sausage, only they were £3 a kilo cheaper. It gave me a good walk. I'd buy two each time and really savoured them. I went back several times.

I felt like I was really living there now. If there was only somewhere I could cook, and if I could only have a space to be alone. That's how the idea of finding a room in a shared house came about. I just needed somewhere with my own private space, where I could be away from everyone, while sharing the kitchen, using the fridge—the facilities.

That made sense. That idea, that feeling of being settled, allowed me to stop feeling like I lived in the hostel. You hear about people living in a hotel for years—they have plenty of money, they like the service, they don't have to do a thing. It was almost like that. I could have just lived there.

Lockdown meant it was a lot quieter, and it got quieter and qui-

eter as the holidays approached, until I felt like I was almost entirely alone. The hostel was never empty, but most people had gone. Just a few staff, and the cleaning women who changed the sheets.

And in that aloneness, I wasn't lonely.

I bought a few tins of beans. I knew if I placed one onto the heater, I could heat it up. All I had to do was open it, then just put it on, and eat them straight from the can. The heater happened to be the kind that had a flat top. I could leave it there and go out, then come back and have something warm.

I didn't buy lots of things to compensate for being alone on Christmas Day. It was just another day. Birthday or not.

But it was lovely to be alone. To have a shower whenever I wanted. It had been challenging, sure. And certainly not settled. Nor the nicest part of London. But all could be dealt with. All could be handled.

And there was the amazing Hare Krishna food.

I knew I could do this now. I knew I could deal with whatever would happen. And as I relaxed and let go, the ideas arrived—how to do things, what to look for, what help might be needed. I tried things. I started to make things happen. I could go forward now. There was nothing behind me.

I knew I wasn't free of the past because I knew that if I ever managed to get my arse into a van again, I had van things waiting to be collected from a neighbour of Mum's who was looking after them. I only had to come back if I could put them into a van. That allowed me to leave so much lighter. I didn't have to get rid of everything because there was no way I could take it with me. And I wasn't in the best mental state as you know, so I'd probably have just dumped them.

The more I let go, the more I got to see that grace was happening all around me. Little moments that could easily go unnoticed if

I was anxious about the future or worrying about the past.

Sitting here as I write this, six years on from all that, can I really put myself into that Simon's mindset? No, not exactly. Because I'm not him anymore. But I can still see him. I can see him doing it, and I know he'll be alright. He'll be challenged for sure, but he'll be alright.

One day, he'll write a book where he'll talk about all this. This idea wouldn't have surprised me back then, because I'd been working on a book for a long time. But I couldn't have imagined that I'd be living a life where I'd be doing that—unconventional as it is.

I did have somebody with me during the hostel experience, from a few weeks before I left Mum's until just after I moved into the shared house. Not physically, of course—she was in America—but through the voice messages we exchanged, often daily. Her name was Leila.

I'd send her a voice message, and she'd reply with one of her own. She was the only person I did this with, where we spoke to each other every day. Not always for long. Mine were usually longer, but hers would sometimes be long enough to make me excited about having a new voice message to listen to.

She supported me by being someone who cared about me during this time.

She didn't stay in my life. We haven't spoken since. Everybody goes. That's just how it is.

But I loved her. She was also neurodivergent, diagnosed with Asperger's. She had her issues. Anger was one of them.

But she was my friend, and I appreciated her very much. She was the only person who was with me during my transition from Mum's.

I needed her, and she was there.

But there was a moment when I tried to make more of it, to be-

come closer to her. There was no way back to America, not really. And she wasn't coming here.

I could feel myself wanting more than just the support she was offering. Trying to make things become more than they were. She reacted negatively.

I sensed this was life's way of telling me that my time with her was coming to an end. She'd done what she needed to do. She'd given me what she had to give. I didn't need anything more from her. I couldn't give her anything more either.

I can't do virtual relationships anyway. I already knew that. I can't really do virtual friendships, either. The only exception had been Lew, and Lew wasn't around anymore.

She was also a writer. She read some of my writing. I read some of hers, but she was a very private person, so we never really went down that road much.

It's hard for me to think about what might be going on for those people I was once close to who are no longer in my life. She was a survivor—of abuse, of cancer. She was tough. She was capable. And she was very sensitive.

I experienced something quite profound when I met her. One of those moments, one of those mystical experiences—I don't know. I've spoken about it before.

I recognised her on a very deep level, like I'd known her before. I wasn't even interacting with her at the time. I just saw her. She was with Patti and a few others. She had dark glasses on and her hood was up, having some kind of paranoid moment. Something was going on for her, and they were helping her.

I felt this reaction in my heart centre—a sensation I've had once or twice before. I realised it was telling me something about her. That we were going to have some kind of connection.

And we did.

I don't know if it was ever truly explored, or whether that was just wishful thinking on my part, or simply an interpretation of something that didn't need interpreting. But the experience was

very real. And it showed me something, because I wasn't expecting it.

I love her. It's just not an active expression now. Who she was no longer exists anyway. Who she is now, I couldn't say.

Maybe one day I'll find out. I can't make it happen. And currently, I can't even inquire about it. Opening the door to the past is not easy for me. It may never be the right thing to do.

But talking about her here—talking about everybody I've talked about in this book—does feel right. And that's why I'm mentioning her.

When my share of mum's flat went into my account—after the remaining large mortgage had been repaid—there was enough to buy a used camper van and support myself in it, which I believed to be the only viable solution to my situation. But I knew I was in no state to do anything about it. I'd only brought what I could carry on my back, having left the rest of my things in a neighbour's cupboard, to be collected should I ever return in a van. Until then, I'd have to find a better living situation; I wouldn't be able to stay in the hostel much longer.

Attempting to find a room to rent was so frustrating that I'd frequently have to stop looking. My only criterion was that it should have a Lidl within walking distance. There were plenty of rooms that fit this idea, but for one reason or another, I wasn't able to rent one; most of the landlords I contacted via the app didn't even reply. I finally went to see what turned out to be a tiny box room in a shared house in Hayes, West London—a four-hour round trip from the hostel. It had five other rooms with people already in them. I knew it wasn't right the moment I saw it, but I took it anyway, just to stop having to look.

From the moment I moved in a few days later, the man in the room next to me forced a confrontation by turning up his music so

loud I had no choice but to act. He reacted very aggressively, not only refusing to turn it down but telling me he could do whatever he liked. Not just with the noise, but also with the cigarette smoking, which was against the rules of the house that I'd been careful to confirm before giving a deposit, and which came in under my door whenever he opened his. I detest the smell of cigarette smoke, ever since my parents subjected me to years of passive smoking when I was a kid, both inside the house and especially in the car. I called the landlord, who apologised profusely, saying he would sort it out. Nothing ever changed.

My neighbour was an Uber driver and had a black Mercedes. Mercs make a distinctive chirp when the key fob is pressed, and it was this sound that let me know that the front door, which was just below my window, was about to slam. It could, of course, be shut more considerately without slamming, and there was a notice reminding tenants to do this. He didn't care. The chirp simply heralded the beginning of the next round of abuse.

Then it suddenly occurred to me: this man was giving me an opportunity to rise above him without simply falling into the trap of hating and seeking revenge, which I did not want to do. I began to see him as my very own 'petty tyrant'—an idea coined by Carlos Castaneda—and as the weather finally began to warm up, I was spending more time outside during the day, walking the common, sitting in the park, and enjoying being anonymous in the world. This anonymity was a gift to me. Nobody knew me. Nobody wanted anything from me. I'd never bump into anyone.

This was the period of my life when Asperger's was finally confirmed to me. I'd begun asking the NHS for help while I was still living with Mum. I'd asked again after I moved into the box room, but nothing was ever offered to me. Then I found myself taking a call from a consultant psychiatrist from Hillingdon Mental Health Services, Tier Two, and it was during this conversation that he suspected what was going on and eventually confirmed it. Knowing this didn't change anything in any practical sense—there was no

help, no support—other than access to a local autistic group which I didn't want. After years of not being understood, being told I was neurologically different changed nothing about how the world saw me. But somebody did refer me to the bereavement service—even though I hadn't asked them to—and it was this charity that offered me weekly counselling therapy over the phone which would end up going on for 18 months. It helped a lot.

Just as it started to get easier for me to accept my neighbour's selfishness, I heard he was leaving, and that was the best news I could've had. During the four weeks his room remained empty, I felt so light and free.

One of the other tenants started complaining that someone was using her spices. I'd been added to the house WhatsApp group otherwise I wouldn't have known; I never spent any time around the other tenants, except if I happened to be in the kitchen when they came in, barely acknowledging them when I saw them. After a short deliberation and zero evidence, she decided it was me. She summarily punished me by stealing my jar of peanut butter and, after I replaced it, smeared the contents over the handles of the cupboard I kept my food in. I knew it was time to go.

I'd been searching for vans over the months, but finding something that was the right size and price, accessible by public transport—requiring buses and trains with hours of waiting for connections—just to view was simply too much for me, never mind being locked down. With so few vans to choose from, I'd pretty much accepted that van life would not be possible. Then I came across a dealer based in Kent. The train to get there was within walking distance, and after just nine stops, I'd be picked up by the salesman waiting for me at the station.

I went to see something they'd originally advertised, but it was just too big, but then I saw something else. Not designed for all-

year-round living—it would be cold in winter, a bit damp and prone to mould—but it was the right size for the road in Penzance near Penlee Park I wanted to return to, and right at the limit of my budget. I felt sure I could make it work, but committing to it, knowing it wasn't right, was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. Even just the thought of owning another van, though it felt like the only solution to my situation, was hard to reconcile. I'd lived in a van before so I knew what it was like. I knew I'd be trading one set of issues for another. But it seemed like the only door that was even slightly open.

It still weighs on me sometimes even now; I think it always will, even though I appreciate having somewhere that I get to call home. I've not only been able to live in it—challenging as the winter is—but I wrote part two of this book in there during the warm months. The solar panel provides enough electricity when the sun is on it, and just enough to top up my phone, and charge my shaver the rest of the year (and I sit in the library and charge my battery bank when it's cold anyway).

I'm entering my fifth winter as I put the final touches to this as a van-dweller. It's not the life I imagined. It's not a life most people would want. But it's the life I have. And it's enough.

Chapter 15

Tempting Fate

My first van was where I learned to live like this. I hadn't mean to live in a van, but when my relationship with Sarah ended, that was where I went. It made sense; I'd acquired it with that possibility in mind, and it may have helped Sarah to end things, knowing I'd have somewhere to be.

I parked on the waste ground known as Sandy Cove, just past Newlyn, about two miles from where Sarah lived. It had views of the bay and St Michael's Mount, and I could watch the sun rise when the sky was clear. Not having a toilet was okay—a plastic bottle worked well—but taking a crap took a little longer to figure out, so I just got used to using public toilets, always carrying a pack of wet wipes with me. Eventually, I found a solution I was happy with, dropping the bin liner into a nearby dog-poo bin, just like everyone else.

I didn't cook at first, though there was a gas hob. I just ate bread, dried and fresh fruit, nuts, and seeds, keeping things simple. It felt easier, and easier was important. I also wanted to avoid stomach issues; the thought of having diarrhoea was almost unthinkable. I didn't eat a hot meal for weeks.

I made up my bed each night: wooden slats across the aisle, sliding the seat cushions over them. I couldn't walk once it was out, so I couldn't leave it out. It was February, and while the small catalytic propane heater worked well, I couldn't leave it on overnight. By the morning, my nose was an ice cube, and if an arm came out of the sleeping bag, it was numb. It was pretty exposed by the sea. I

slept in my clothes, inside two fleece jackets and a woolly hat, inside two sleeping bags—and still had to put the heater on around five just to keep sleeping.

I didn't like how it felt to leave the van. It was my sanctuary, my protector, and seemed more vulnerable than something made of bricks. While a house can be broken into, you rarely come home to find the house gone. It took me some time before I could walk away comfortably. I always stopped for a moment, look back, and with a sense of gratitude for what the van gave me, thank it for looking after me, then walk away. I'd still get anxious returning, though, looking for it as soon as it was possible to see it. There were a couple of times when, just for a second, because of the way another vehicle had parked, it looked like it wasn't there. My heart missed a beat, and it made me wonder what would happen if I ever found it gone.

I'd go into town to spend a few hours in the library. I always walked because no matter how slowly I drove, it always felt too fast, so walking became my norm. This meant that when the weather was bad—it was a four-mile round trip—there were days when I never left.

The initial challenge was water. When I first parked there, I noticed an old van far from everything. I walked over to it, and that's when Kit came out: a local cook with a black dog who lived in this van with a wood-burning stove and too much stuff. He told me about a spring a few miles away. It was the kind of encounter that only happens when you live on the fringes—people appearing from nowhere, sharing what they know, then disappearing back into their own lives.

I'd noticed a tap near the lifeboat station and, if I could get near it, I'd be able to fill up my on-board water tank using a two-litre plastic bottle to pour it in. Each time I walked into town, I'd fill up the water bottle I drank from, thus ensuring the tank would last as long as possible. There were other springs nearby, one right outside Sandy Cove, but they didn't always taste nice. The spring Kit

mentioned did; I filled up there many times.

If I was going to live in the van, I'd have to let go of the fear of losing it, and to do that I'd need to accept there was no reason to be afraid in the first place. I came up with what I called 'Tempting Fate': setting myself little challenges that pushed the boundaries of what I felt comfortable with. I soon realised I wasn't tempting fate at all but finding faith—faith I'd once had but had lost. If I was going to find it again, I'd have to face my fears, free myself, or at least feel the freedom that comes from knowing what it's like to have nothing to fear. I was afraid of what I didn't want to happen, so I had to see this not as a real thing, but as something I was imagining. I had to be able to walk away without feeling anxious, and I decided I had to do so while leaving everything behind.

I didn't make it fifty yards the first time before my mind came up with a reason to go back: I'd better take my backpack, or at least put my laptop away. But eventually, I walked away, recording myself talking as I did. I sat on a bench in the village for an hour and didn't hurry back.

I left everything to see if it would feel like I didn't need anything: nothing to protect, nothing to hold onto, nothing to worry about, nothing to lose. I left the doors unlocked the next time and my laptop clearly visible. Eventually, I left my phone, van keys, and my wallet as well. I came to understand that to live without fear didn't mean giving up all my stuff, only releasing my attachment to it. It made a difference.

I never had to work. I never had to sign on. I never had to lie about why I deserved to receive benefits. I didn't have to maintain that mask any longer. I'd hated maintaining it, believing I had to if I wanted to be supported by the state. But I didn't want to live that anymore. I could let go.

And I had teachers with me—Bashar, Mooji, and Eckhart Tolle.

I listened to them almost on a loop; ET the most. As soon as I'd finished focusing on one recording, I'd move to the next, and by the time I'd reached the end of everything I had, I'd start again from the beginning. There was a lovely sense of familiarity, and it felt like each recording was almost new again. It was like meeting an old friend—spending time with them, being there, still, present. I did this for hours every day for months.

That was grace. A huge grace.

I received an unexpected visitor today: my future self to be exact. From somewhere further along my timeline, he reached out to me, revealing that even though I wasn't close to becoming him, it was clear by the way he spoke that he was definitely me. He said he was here, not to help me avoid some approaching pitfall, but to let me know that whatever took place, whatever I did next, would always lead me to him. He wanted me to know that I was doing fine, and whatever happened was just what needed to.

I asked him many questions, discovering he would only tell me what I was ready to hear. Having this conversation felt both weird and perfectly normal; it took place internally, like talking to someone I knew really well. It was obvious how well he knew me. I can't say how far into the future he was, yet his presence was unmistakably real.

I found it very easy to talk to him, which let me take what I was able to say to another level. There was never any sense of judgement, just awareness. He was here to reveal himself, not change me. He told me I was ready to meet him, which is why I recognised who he was.

Apparently, time is quite a fluid thing—like holding up a strip of movie film where you can see each frame in whatever order you want rather than viewing them linearly. He said it didn't matter what I did, it would always end up being what he'd already done,

so there was nothing to worry about. I just had to experience it without worrying about the outcome; I had to remain open to whatever took place.

Knowing he'd already done this made me feel very peaceful. He said there was a lot more to come, and from where he was, he seemed so much more than I could imagine. He wasn't telling me my future, only that I had one. He wanted me to let go of my doubts—doubts that were stopping me from being myself, and that I'd never stop becoming him. I just had to keep going.

I was asked to leave Sandy Cove a few months later. Someone had been complaining that my being there was spoiling their view. Sandy Cove was run by the Harbour Authority, and the Harbour Master came to speak to me; I could see he didn't want to do this. Having to leave really affected me. All the trials I'd put myself through—the leaving of doors unlocked, the walking away from everything I owned—hadn't prepared me for how it would feel not to live there anymore. I'd practised letting go of my stuff, but I hadn't practised letting go of a place that had become home.

It turned out that some people also complain when you park in a quiet road. While it wasn't very nice having to explain myself to authority, the police were fine, as was the man from the council whose job was to move on travellers—I didn't know this job even existed—and they left me alone afterwards. Still, the experience was unsettling. What made these encounters work was my lack of resistance; the uniforms were just doing their job.

I stuck a Cornish flag sticker on the back and put a notice in the passenger window explaining a little of how I came to be here, so that other residents might not be concerned.

While at Sandy Cove, Sue, a local lady, would let me use her Wi-Fi. If I moved the van beneath her window, without having to leave the cove, I could get online. I even received a postcard, ad-

dressed to: *The white van, Sandy Cove, Newlyn.* It turned out that the postman lived nearby, and when the card turned up at the sorting office and the lads were unsure what to do with it, he knew the van it referred to. He turned up in his red van and handed it to me as I sat outside. Whenever he walked his dogs, he'd come over and say hello.

I'd been with Sarah because I wanted to be Emaly's Dad. I felt I needed Sarah to be her mum while I learned how to do this; no other option made sense at the time. But Emaly was living her own life now, so if Sarah hadn't ended it, I might never have experienced any of this.

Sarah used to struggle with what to buy me for a present. Even though it took some time to realise it, she'd actually given me the best gift of all: freedom. It was what I'd always wanted. I just hadn't known how to ask for it.

Chapter 16

Getting Away With It

I CAN'T SAY if I'll ever stop trying to 'get away with it.' My mind still comes up with certain ideas; I've had them ever since I was a kid. I've gotten away with many things. But unlike at that dealership, when I felt I could only change my life by blowing it up, I live a lot simpler now.

My remaining 'criminal activities' consist of smoking locally grown organic cannabis that I'm gifted—still illegal at the time of writing even though it's been possible to have it prescribed on the NHS for several years—and watching media that I download from 'sharing' sites, so I have plenty to keep me amused. So, if I ever do something that has the potential to blow my life up again, I'd better be sure I'm ready for what may come from it.

I received a coupon for some free fruit from Lidl. I chose a punnet of strawberries, and picked up some bananas and a couple of packs of ramen at the same time. After scanning everything at the self-service checkout, I noticed that the coupon had been applied to the 78p bananas rather than the £2 strawberries. The assistant removed the bananas, which allowed the strawberries to become free, explaining that the till automatically picked the cheapest item to apply it to. She left; I paid. I was supposed to put the bananas through separately, but instead, I just put them into my bag and walked away.

I felt bad before I reached the door. I'd just done something that could potentially cause me a lot of trouble—and for what? 78p? I could argue that the decision to apply the coupon to the

least expensive item was unfair; anyone buying a trolley full of shopping would probably have no idea this had happened. Perhaps taking the bananas was my way of getting back at the company. But if that were true, I'd have been happy to get away with it, enjoying the fruit while knowing I'd got them for free.

My decision to steal from the dealership contained an element of payback to it, at least at first. It made the acquisition of their money feel acceptable, bringing a brief sense of joy each time I got away with it. But taking the bananas had none of that. I took them just because I knew I could.

Negative consequences weren't considered; there were no thoughts one way or another. To get away with it, everything must seem normal—and hesitating or looking around because I'm suddenly feeling guilty would not be. I put the bananas into my bag before my conscience could *tell me* not to. Reality came back moments later, along with an undeniable feeling of dread. My usual self-awareness, and my so-called wisdom, were simply not there.

I waited there while I experienced all this, just in case there was going to be an issue, then left without making it seem like anything was wrong. It wasn't until I was some distance from the store that I stopped feeling the potential disruption that could've come from it. Perhaps I wasn't noticed by security. Perhaps I wouldn't end up being banned again after all.

I hadn't liked it the first time this happened. I still don't think I did anything wrong; I'd just been impatient. It was ten years earlier, before the self-service checkouts were even installed—late Friday afternoon, incredibly busy, and I only wanted one thing; a bottle of ice-cold fresh orange juice. I walked right to the front of the long queue of shopping trolleys, slapped the money down at the checkout, and walked out. I could hear the till operator protesting, but I knew I wasn't stealing; I was just subverting the system.

Moments later, the manager came running out and grabbed the bottle right out of my hand. I could see he had my money in his hand, yet was still accusing me of theft. I explained calmly why

this wasn't the case. He then asked me to go back inside and pay for it 'properly,' queuing behind the trolleys in order to give him what he already had.

"Either you pay for it properly or you can have your money back," he stated. "I'll take my money back," I replied, instantly giving up the thirst-quenching cold juice I'd really wanted. Had I opened it, he couldn't have done this.

He handed me the money and as I walked away he said: "You're banned!"

I left to be with Patti not long after this.

When I came back I bought a few things from Lidl, but it took a couple of visits before the manager noticed me. We made eye contact for a moment; I no longer felt like the man who'd usurp the system; I knew I'd never do it again.

I looked away casually without avoiding him, carrying on with my shopping as if the entire event hadn't happened. He returned to speaking with the staff member. I can't say whether he remembered me or simply decided not to make anything more of it, but I was glad I could continue to shop there.

I am, and perhaps always will be, someone for whom doing what might be seen as 'the right thing' isn't always the choice I make. I might see it as the choice I could've made when I look at things after, but it's not always the choice I make at the time. I put this down to being neurodivergent. It doesn't make it right—just explainable.

If I get away with something without being discovered, without consequences, and without feeling like I've done something wrong, I might easily become over-confident, even arrogant. I did not like how it felt to jeopardise my life situation by taking something just because I could. It's not something someone who lives a simple life ought to do.

Taking the bananas would not have occurred had there not been an issue with the coupon. To have resisted it would have been, paradoxically, like going against the need to express myself

authentically—to feel like I'm being who I am. But then, a few days before Christmas that year, I found myself doing something much more serious.

I went into the library just as it opened. There was someone already sitting in the chair opposite me. After about an hour he left, leaving behind a purple rain jacket on the back of the chair—one of those waterproof thin shell-types. Three hours later, the jacket was still there. Whoever left it couldn't have been the guy sitting there when I arrived. How could he leave his raincoat when it was pouring? Who wouldn't notice they weren't wearing it when they left the building?

The rain eventually stopped and I went out for lunch, and when I came back, a woman was sitting where I'd sat. Fortunately, there was a purple jacket on the chair opposite her, so nobody was sitting there. I took the jacket off the chair and hung it up behind me. At some point the woman left, and I moved over to that chair again.

A few hours later—the jacket having now been there for five hours—I decided to look inside one of the pockets. I wasn't expecting to see more than a used tissue or a few coins, but I found a wallet, and inside it was a wad of cash.

Without thinking, I took the cash and put the wallet back. I told myself I was just curious, that anyone would have looked. But that was a lie. I just couldn't understand why anyone would leave a jacket with a wallet full of money and not come back as soon as possible, or at least call and ask the staff to keep it safe. I packed away my stuff and left.

I felt awful the moment I left the building. I knew I'd done the wrong thing. I should never have looked in the pocket; the jacket had nothing to do with me. I should've just handed it in and carried on with my life. I decided to put the money back. I went back

in, but somebody was sitting right in front of the jacket, and I just didn't feel I could go over and take the wallet out again.

I took a seat nearby, feeling like everything had just changed. I was still there as the library was about to close. I'd been imagining the owner coming back, retrieving his jacket from lost property, opening the wallet, and finding the money gone—then security looking through the CCTV recording. I hadn't thought about the cameras, and one definitely overlooked the area. I wasn't sure if it could see the jacket, but it would surely be obvious it was me. I realised that at some point I was going to encounter the police.

I decided not to spend the money; I put it aside until I'd have the chance to give it back. When the police came to question me, returning it would be part of making things right, while I offered some kind of explanation as to why I'd taken it. I'd probably get banned from the library. My life would be very different without it; the library is a big part of my day, especially in winter, and losing access would make being here much harder. I knew I wasn't going to get away with it this time.

I decided to tell the truth, rather than remain silent and make them prove it. I'd have my say this time, and whatever punishment I received, I'd accept. This would be my first conviction; perhaps I'd just get community service. I didn't think it warranted a custodial sentence, but I didn't know for sure. I doubted anything would happen until after Christmas, but I knew that at some point, while I'm sitting in the library in the new year, I'll be arrested again.

I'd never taken money from a wallet before. It was like I couldn't stop myself. I really did want to put it back, and if I had, my conscience would've been clear; I certainly wouldn't be agonising over it. The feeling that my life had changed for the worse was really strong. I'd even found a purse in the street once and handed it in at the police station with the cash still inside it, surprising the officer when he opened it. Why had this time been so different?

Four months later

With the police not appearing, even though I'd sat in the library every day, I was sitting in the van with my headphones on when I thought I heard an odd sound. It was like someone scraping against the side of the van. It took me a moment to process this noise, but when I opened the door I didn't see anyone. It wasn't until the morning that I noticed the passenger door and the tailgate had been keyed.

Over the next few weeks, I felt the need to be extra aware in case whoever did this came back. Was it a message? Were they telling me to go—and if I didn't, would they do it again?

A few weeks later, when nothing further happened and I'd begun to relax, a thought occurred to me: Blue Justice.

I'd heard the term before—the idea that when the police can't prove something, they find other ways to make you pay. The keying of my van felt like that. They might've known it was me, but perhaps there wasn't quite enough evidence to prove it. Having taken place just before Xmas, any CCTV may have been naturally wiped as they're usually on a loop. So I'd been visited by someone who ensured the value of my van was reduced by more than the money taken. I couldn't imagine anyone just randomly doing this. I'd checked the other vans in the road to see if anything had happened to them—it was just me. It felt personal.

If it was 'Blue Justice,' then I'd paid the price and that should be the end of it. Whoever keyed it could have done a lot more. Still, it left me feeling really vulnerable. I didn't feel safe anymore. I wondered what might've happened had I been quicker to open the door?

I'd spent the entire Christmas period worrying about the future. I thought I was going to be arrested in the New Year and everything would change.

Unlike at the dealership, when I wanted things to change and was willing to accept whatever would come from it, I was terrified this time. I didn't want anything to change. My life had become simple, contained, manageable. I had something to lose now. The

van took the hit. I got away with it.

Chapter 17

A Deeper Insight

Patti

FROM THE MOMENT I ARRIVED, we were touching; hands moving, exploring. She'd been waiting for this. The apartment was very warm; clothes came off and sex took place. It happened again a bit later, and then again the following morning, but by the third time, I knew I couldn't do it anymore. I wasn't attracted to her; not even slightly.

I thought this might happen when the idea of visiting her first came up. While I knew sex was likely—perhaps even necessary—I couldn't continue having it. Sex was something she really wanted; physical intimacy and touch were the one thing that still worked for her. Her eyes weren't that good, nor was her hearing. While smell and taste had been affected by a mild stroke and subsequent neurological issues, it was touch she craved.

I couldn't explain what was going on for me. I didn't know what to say or how to say it, so I just made it obvious that something was wrong and I needed space. It was all I could do to avoid making it a much bigger issue. I knew I couldn't have her touch me anymore, but I had to tell her why, if for no other reason than to stop her wanting what she'd come to believe was available. What came out wasn't easy to articulate; it forced her to go through her own process of coming to terms with it.

A few days later, she asked if she could try something—just to see if it would release me from what she said was the problem. I

was intrigued. Maybe she was right; maybe I did just need healing. She proceeded to give me an intense full-body massage, followed by the most sustained oral sex I'd ever had. As I lay there watching her, impressed by her efforts, I felt nothing. I wasn't involved, with no possibility of finishing. Not even close.

I'd chosen to spend the winter with her instead of being alone in the van. I cooked our meals—something I'm good at, and immersed myself in her world, meeting the people she called friends, even speaking to her therapist when I was invited to sit in on a session.

We talked about so many things. She revealed her beliefs and her fears, sometimes just through her actions. I explored everything with her, helping her connect the dots differently and releasing ideas she no longer needed.

She lived in a single room with a small en-suite bathroom—perfect for working as a transcriptionist, but not for hosting a long-term visitor. Yet, coming out of my van, it was still a lot bigger than I'd been used to, and I really appreciated having access to household items again. Her place was always warm as the heating was on 24/7 and included in the rent. I could walk about with a minimum of clothing on, and still sleep naked when it was -25°C outside.

Having access to cannabis helped a lot, and because it was used sparingly, the little she had—together with what we were sometimes gifted—ensured I could slip into my own world whenever I needed to, both as an escape and a remedy.

Each morning I'd make us breakfast: organic porridge with organic milk, chopped dried fruits, nuts, and seeds, together with a mashed-up ripe banana. I had a system of buying and ripening them to ensure the right level of ripeness was always available. Once it was ready, I'd silently put a bowl by her as she worked and eat mine on the sofa. Still without a word, I'd put on meditation music, letting her hear something she'd not heard before, or sometimes even a teaching—something she enjoyed very much.

She didn't have Wi-Fi, so while she used her phone to connect her laptop for work, I'd sit in a nearby coffee shop. I didn't drink coffee or buy anything while I was there, but I'd come back with the latest films, documentaries, and TV shows.

Every so often, she'd tell me that someone was picking us up, or there was somewhere to go, or someone to see; arrangements having been made silently via text. I just accepted whatever it was. It didn't matter what we did or where we went; it was just good to have unexpected changes that got me out of her room and around other people.

I felt more comfortable observing what went on when I was out with her. It allowed the people I met time to reveal who they were, but I knew I wasn't revealing myself to them. I hardly said anything. My past felt more like a story now; there seemed nothing to say about what, for me, was no longer relevant.

While living with Patti was challenging, returning home showed me the connection wasn't easily broken. I became emotional when we arrived at the airport. She kissed me quickly and walked away. It was over, and only now would the real exploration take place.

I knew I wasn't in love with her; that feeling seemed proportional to my desire to have sex. However long it took from meeting someone to being with her sexually seemed to make a difference as to how long that feeling lasted once I was. I'd find myself doing or saying whatever would help that occur.

There were women I'd fancied that I never tried to be with—some were so attractive they mesmerised me into simply observing from afar. To do anything else would've created an overwhelming anxiety by having to say the right thing while attempting to be myself, only to watch as I turned out to be someone else yet again. The women I had relationships with required a lot of time to work out. Whatever I did while going through the 'in love' phase was never enough to sustain things once it was released through sustained sexual activity.

The experience leading up to sex was always gentle and loving, but once things become sexual, it started to change. If my motive was to have my desires met, she'd have to fit that idea, so I never got to be with *her*; I only got to be with my idea of her, fuelled by the cocktail of chemicals produced by my brain.

With Patti, there was an implied understanding that sex would form part of my time with her, and it made sense as we'd be sleeping in the same bed. While still in the van, she'd text me to let me know she'd just masturbated, which she did every day, calling it "having a tingle."

Experiencing virtual sex in the van was little more than having someone *there* while using my imagination; I tried this with a few women I became close to online, but it didn't take long before it began feeling seedy.

Being Emaly's Dad, without expecting her Mum to be anything other than her Mum, I discovered that desire had still fuelled things between us. Lurking just out of sight, it turned it into a much harder experience, forcing me to accept something I didn't know how to accept while doing my best to be the father Emaly needed me to be—which was, after all, my reason for being there.

With Patti, I could easily imagine being with her sexually, just as she could with me, and these imaginings had to then be released before reality could take over. When Patti wanted sex, I wouldn't let it happen, even if it seemed like it might be okay this time, avoiding setting off a chain of events that would make it much harder to withdraw from again later.

It felt like she'd put me on a pedestal; seeing me as an evolved person. I could never be the man she saw me as, and therefore could never be who I was either.

So much happened during those first three months that when class was finally dismissed, I knew that a long period of reflection would be necessary.

Back in the van, the issues began to fade, and the loneliness that came from living this way made it seem like being with her might actually be possible after all. I could barely remember what the problems had been. Surely I could overcome them. And if I could, she'd be my perfect companion; someone who really cared about me and could help me interface with other people, ensuring we both got what we needed so that, as a stranger in a strange land, there was someone I could be with, someone I trusted—weird as the situation would be.

She was living somewhere else when I left Florida to be with her again, in a room less than half the size of the previous one. The bathroom was now along the hall and shared. When the mattress was put on the floor for me to sleep on, there was no room to move.

Initially, I accepted her request to lie next to her on the bed. She also liked to take my hand when we were out walking. But the feeling of aversion became as strong as ever; I wouldn't be able to overcome it after all.

So here I am, living with someone I can't be intimate with, in a tiny room that's really too small for one, while she seems happy to have me with her. And then, as if to compound everything, a few weeks later, Lew dies.

The news of his death devastated me. It felt like I'd lost a brother. His death pushed me over the edge; I had a breakdown. But I was exactly where I needed to be to deal with it. It took some time, but I had the time, and was with someone who had the kindness, to grieve.

Not long after Lew's death, the corner apartment became vacant and we moved in. It had four windows instead of one and was three times the size; it made a big difference. This was where I started colouring mandalas. Initially, it was little more than simple adult-colouring therapy, but I quickly realised how valuable it was. It forced me into focussing so precisely on what I was doing that the demons running round my head quieted.

Spending several hours each day—sometimes from sunrise to sunset—with earplugs or music in my ears, I focused on creating them with the precision I wanted them to have. I chose harder and more demanding templates, and it soon became all I wanted to do. I'd sit in my very comfortable armchair—a gift from a friend just for me—and do little else.

Unfortunately for Patti, I preferred doing this to spending any time with her, and as the days went by, it bothered her. She started to mess with my concentration: closing doors or cupboards loudly, wanting me to do things she could do herself, getting me to go to the supermarket, or having me go and help someone with something trivial. Anything but let me do what I wanted. She wanted a companion; I wanted to make mandalas. I'd acquired another 'petty tyrant'.

I was experiencing a near-constant state of aversion by this point, especially when she'd help herself to my cannabis. I left it out so she could do so, but I struggled with her taking it. The colouring helped, giving me a way to dissipate my feelings without having to say something I'd regret. I held my tongue, which wasn't always easy, but it was the price I had to pay to be there. I knew I was being totally unreasonable. She shared everything she had with me. And yet, the part of me that still needed control—that needed to hold onto something that was just mine—saw this as an encroachment. The paradox was this: I was living off her kindness, and I resented her for it. I clung to my cannabis and my colouring books as if they were the last fragments of a self that was slowly being dissolved by her. It felt like a slow, suffocating kindness.

Patti would often host other tenants. They'd come in to watch things I'd downloaded that they'd not otherwise see, especially British comedy and drama. I'd never been part of a little group like this before, and I loved it, and all because of Patti.

I'd sometimes go out with another tenant, Layla. I felt very connected to her. She'd drive us into nature and we'd hike, just the two of us. I loved spending time with her, even though we'd some-

times come to verbal blows at Patti's when she'd attempt to have me accept the view she had of me. I even had a sleepover with her when I was having problems with Justine. I didn't share her bed, but I liked being in her room; it was so calming.

But Patti was the key. She gave me somewhere to be every time I split up with Justine; none of it could have happened without her. And yet, at the end of our time in each other's lives, I couldn't wait for her to go. I couldn't deal with her lying on Mum's sofa while Mum watched TV. She was visiting—something she'd planned long before I ever decided to leave America—and while this did keep Mum company, which allowed me more time to be on my own, I needed her gone. I couldn't begin to sort myself out while having someone around from a time when I was essentially someone else, and who could only see me that way.

During this time, we took a train down to Penzance for three days. She'd wanted to see where I'd been living and offered to pay for me to go. I really needed a break from Mum, and Mum was fine about it.

Patti hadn't mentioned that there was only one bed in the Airbnb; she assumed I'd just share with her. But when I saw it, I knew I couldn't do that. I told her I'd go home—she could have the experience by herself, which had been her original intention anyway. I'd agreed to her hiring a car so that I would drive her around the area, so she understandably didn't want me to go, but there was no way I was going to sleep on the small and uncomfortable sofa. She said she'd sleep on it. That was an acceptable solution, even though I knew she would not be comfortable.

One evening, I was walking through town alone, feeling the familiar pull of my own internal world. I slipped into the Co-op to see what might be reduced, my mind on other things. And then I saw her.

For a moment, I didn't register who it was. I was just walking towards this person who was looking at me with an expression I'd never seen on her face before—fear, or worry, or surprise, I could-

n't tell. It was a warning, though. I could feel that much. And then, all at once, the awareness arrived: it was Emaly and she was heavily pregnant! My daughter, who I hadn't seen in years, was about to become a mother, and I was learning about it in the aisle of a supermarket.

I hadn't expected to see her. I'd known it was possible—it's a small place—but I was in my own world, heading towards the chiller. It must have looked like I was walking directly towards her with purpose, but I wasn't. I was just there. If I'd been able to feel connected to her in that moment—to hug her, to be happy to see her, to look at her pregnancy and say how amazing it was—that moment could've been the beginning of a reconciliation. Everything in me knew that was what should happen. But I didn't feel it. I just felt numb. Awkward. Like a stranger.

All I could do was acknowledge her, the way you might nod at someone you barely recognise from years ago. I managed one word: "Hello." She looked at me as if I were the last person she wanted to see. She muttered something about her friend waiting in a car outside, and was gone before I could even think to say anything else. She went to the till, paid, and left. I made no attempt to stop her. I just stood there, frozen, and watched her walk away, knowing I'd just failed the most important moment I'd had in years.

I told Patti what had happened when I got back. She'd made contact with Emaly while we were still in America—without telling me. She'd done this after I'd reached out to her daughter, who she'd been estranged from for several years and who'd recently had a child. Patti wanted to be a grandmother, but was still ostracised from her life. I explained to her daughter who I was and that I was living with Patti, and after a few conversations they met and reconciliation took place. So I could see she was trying to reciprocate—to help me in my situation with my daughter.

At the time, it felt like something that could have helped. She never told me what was said, only that she hadn't been in contact

with her for a while when she finally revealed it. She said she'd message her in the morning; I told her not to. It didn't feel right. Emaly had had a shock. The only thing worse would have been me trying to do so. But Patti didn't listen. Whatever Emaly said to her, Patti never told me. She spared me from it. But the fact that she'd done that after I'd expressly asked her not to really angered me—I was already feeling like I wouldn't continue with her in my life. This just confirmed it.

I didn't sit with her on the train back. I wanted nothing more to do with her. I wanted her gone as quickly as possible.

When we returned to Mum's flat, I left her alone with Mum. I knew she'd be leaving in a few days, and it couldn't come soon enough.

On the day of her departure, she told me she'd just received a text from the airline saying her flight had been unexpectedly changed—she was going to have to take the earlier one. She'd have to leave immediately. As I was taking her to the airport, I now had to drive like a maniac, through the rush-hour traffic, overtaking whenever possible just to get her there in time. The last thing I wanted was for her not to go.

I pulled up. She got out. I said goodbye and drove off. It was twenty minutes before the flight was due to leave. I didn't care what happened to her next.

I received a text from her after I got back to say it had been a mistake—she didn't need to be there so early after all. She was on the original flight. It's unlikely there was ever a mistake. I think she created the whole thing. She knew I wanted rid of her. She knew it would be the last time we'd see each other. But also I might have said I wasn't going to take her. Had I done that she'd have enough time to make her way there by public transport. Either way, whatever was going through her mind, she gave me a 'parting gift'.

I'd known she was a master manipulator. I'd seen how she worked the system in her own life—getting support from the state,

handling bureaucracies, playing the game with skill. I'd always assumed she was benign with me. But as things deteriorated between us, she turned her manipulations onto me. It became about control, and I couldn't handle it. I knew being with her wasn't good for me. Her control became corrupted, just as it had in me around Sarah. It's not something one person is supposed to have over another. It became toxic, for both of us.

A Letter to Sukhvir

I never sent this letter. I wanted to, but there didn't seem any point. He was already gone from my life in the ways that mattered, and sending it would have only made things more complicated. So I wrote it for myself instead.

Dear Sukhvir,

It's taken me a long time to let you know I arrived home safely, because it's taken me a long time to feel like I wanted to tell you anything at all.

I don't know if it was having your live-in helper there, but talking to you properly could not happen with someone else at the table. When I realised I wasn't able to speak to you like I once did, I knew something was different. When you asked me if I still loved the Mother, I didn't know what to say. I can't say I ever loved her outside of who she was to me at the time. You worship her, and that's not something I know how to do. Maybe it's the English in me, or maybe it's just who I am. With little shrines all over your home, knowing many of them weren't put there by you—yet it is you who lives there when your benefactors are not around, and you wouldn't accept them if it wasn't what you wanted.

I never meant to see you again; I was sure Pondicherry was finished for me. I'd wanted to go somewhere new this time, but I ended up returning to the familiar. At least, I thought it was familiar. While many things were, so much had changed that it was like re-

turning to a different place. These changes were in me too, making Pondicherry feel like somewhere I didn't belong anymore.

The way you saw me wasn't something I could identify with. I have a huge problem with the term 'Chosen One,' and when you asked if I might be him, I couldn't even begin to respond. The irony wasn't lost on me—you had asked the very question that had caused me such difficulty before, and yet I still couldn't face it. I told myself that talking about it would only get me into ego-trouble, and that was true. But it was also an excuse. I didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to look at what it might mean. Still, I wish I'd been able to say something.

When I arrived this time, it took you a moment to remember who I even was, but once you did, you revealed fond memories of our time together. But you're clearly getting on a bit; I don't know how gracefully awakened beings age, but if you're as conscious as you seem, I received the experience I needed, not the one I was hoping to get. You actually helped me let you go—or let go of the idea of you—and you let go of me; the man you thought I was. You even said I was not the man you thought I was after having listened to my conversation with Sarah.

When I'd told you on the phone how hard things had been, you told me to come and see you and all would be well. You said I'd stay with you and we'd sort everything out. This encouraged me to buy the ticket. But I needed the taxi driver to help me find you. When your helper turned up to show me where to go, I suddenly knew exactly where I was and could've walked there myself easily. Everything felt off from the start. I can't say who I was in coming to see you, but as soon as I arrived, I wasn't who I thought I'd be.

Had I been able to stay with you, had there been nobody else there, I would've found a way to open up. It might've taken a few days, but I'd have done it. Once I realised I couldn't, there seemed little point in remaining in Pondicherry. I felt myself resisting everything. I resisted finding a room. Resisted the idea that I'd need to. Without staying with you, there was no reason to be there.

And you have a very controlling presence. You want everything done your way. I get it; I'm similar. But if going out before you are awake causes such a problem because I have to leave the door unlocked, you reveal a fear I'd actually seen in you before. What mattered to me was not waking you. I call it being considerate, but I also need to feel like I'm free. I don't like having to ask permission to go out. The last time I stayed with you, I had my own key. Telling me how to use the shower the way you do, as if you were instructing a child, was off-putting. Whatever my customs might be, you may suggest, not instruct. But preferably, just let me be who I am.

Last time, I connected with the Mother. I read the whole of her Agenda. While I loved the idea of her, I have to be my own mother, not follow Her. I have to be my own father, not follow Him. I need no image to worship, no tradition to keep. I am who I am. I make it up as I go along. Everything is always happening for the first time. If it must be "what would Mother do" or "what would Father do," then it isn't what I need to do. I take ideas and make them my own. $1+1=3$. I am 3, not just another one. That's not arrogance. It's just what it means to be alive.

So, my friend, to me you were the highest, most realised man I'd ever met, and you were an important part of my life. For you, a small part perhaps; for me, a much bigger one. But a man such as you deserves respect. While I wasn't as honest as I could have been, I was honest enough to know I was there for a reason. So even though all I wanted was to let my old life go, I was also aware that you knew what you were doing, and I trusted my guru, even if I wasn't sure you were my guru anymore.

If the experience was just as it needed to be, it means that, consciously or not, you were the one who helped me find what I needed. You were what I needed when I needed you, even though much of what I experienced happened without you. Living with you last time made a huge difference. Had I remained there, I wouldn't have taken the journey with Sarah I've been on, but then had I stayed, perhaps I would've become more like you. The son you nev-

er had. The father I never really knew. I saw you as a friend, even though you were a lot more than that. I wanted to share myself, but never really could. I was more like an advanced tourist who just stayed longer than the others. I don't know if you were expecting me to stay. Perhaps you just went about your day without giving me much thought.

You brought two people to see me the first time I stayed with you: a very learned man and a young woman. The latter a potential match. It was all very formal. I couldn't really be myself with either of them. So much could have been different, but of course, it also couldn't have been anything other than it was. In another reality, Simon became your assistant and your helper, teaching English to those who wanted it. I could have been anything, set myself up as anything—all legalities taken care of by you.

I can't say what made me leave back then; perhaps it was unfinished business. I knew my timing was off, though. The day I left I met a Canadian woman looking for a smoke and we made a connection. It might've been nice to have explored that. I was literally just about to go, so I had to accept I wouldn't be able to. But I also knew I was only going because I'd decided to go. Had I not, her arrival would've offered me a very different experience. Perhaps I was saved from going down another rabbit hole. The Universe has a way of giving me what I need, as well as ensuring that what I don't need I don't get. It does sometimes make me think... here's what you could've had.

And then, of course, there's the trouble with sex.

The Trouble with Sex

Sex was hidden from me growing up. There was a feeling of taboo surrounding the very idea of knowing anything about it. My parents told me nothing, and my school's idea of sex education was to

frighten us from ever doing it. At fourteen, they made us watch a short informational video showing a detailed close-up of a penis discharging pus from gonorrhoea. It was horrible.

I experienced my first *girlfriend* when I was ten. Her friend, Shira, was meant to be with my friend, Nick, but when we went over to their house to 'play'—even though Judith was lying on her bed with me—Shira kept coming over and kissing me on the lips. I had no idea what to do with either of them; body parts were never touched; it was little more than playing.

When I discovered my Dad hid girlie mags in the bottom of his wardrobe, everything changed. I was twelve. The women became very desirable to me; I looked at them many times and fantasised about them constantly, all while being unable to do anything about releasing the feeling. The idea of masturbating simply did not exist in me.

Seeing naked women was exciting, but it wasn't until I was wrestling with my cousin a few years later that I discovered there was something I didn't know about my body. I'd had a few clues while climbing the ropes during P.E. at school: if I held myself in one place and then let myself descend really slowly, I experienced pleasurable sensations between my legs. It wasn't until my cousin put his weight on me that day—inadvertently pressing on my crotch—that things suddenly exploded.

I rushed into the bathroom and locked the door. As I looked at what was inside my pants, the image of that penis in the video flashed before my eyes. I concluded I had VD, and even worse—I'd caught it while playing with my cousin!

The video had made it clear that seeing a doctor was essential. My cousin kept knocking on the door, asking if I was okay. I felt I had no choice; I'd have to tell Mum. On the way downstairs, just as I heard voices coming from the kitchen, it suddenly dawned on me what had actually happened. I made my way back upstairs, relieved that I no longer had to say anything.

Having access to those mags, and now being able to relieve my-

self, my desire became even stronger. Those women made me want the real thing really badly.

By the time it finally happened—at eighteen—while it was certainly nicer in some ways, it was also a lot more complicated than the familiarity of my own solitary experience. I felt a pressure to perform and never wanted to finish too quickly; I also had to ensure I never came inside her; I hated using condoms. I liked pleasing her because I liked what happened when I did, but doing so wasn't always possible. I finally realised I preferred my own fantasies, where the women just did what I wanted. It wasn't about anyone else; it was just about me.

I liked to touch Sarah while she slept. It wasn't about connection or intimacy; it was about release. I didn't know how to be her partner. I didn't know who she really was. I only knew she was Emaly's Mum. My aim was to relieve myself without waking her, then go back to sleep when I was done.

She had to be asleep, though. If I sensed she was awake, I wouldn't even try. Often getting annoyed, she'd reveal she'd been awake all along as she got up to lay a towel over the wet patch before going back to sleep. The feeling of 'getting away with it'—that secret thrill—was more exciting than the climax ever was.

I knew I couldn't just do it this way, so I decided to please her first whenever we had sex. And it worked. As she lay there feeling the post-orgasm glow, I'd enter her without feeling selfish at all. I did this with all my girlfriends, but it was Sarah who really brought it out.

We eventually stopped sleeping in the same bed, briefly moving into separate rooms, then separate homes, although I still went round every day like I lived there, letting myself in with my key—only going home to sleep; I never spent the night. Eventually we stopped having sex entirely, so I'd take my chances if she ever fell asleep on the sofa. I knew it wasn't right, but I enjoyed the danger. But then I almost got caught, which was when I knew I had to stop. It was getting ridiculous.

With Justine, it was different. She wanted me to touch her—not sexually, just intimately. I'd get stoned, put on ambient music, and touch her gently to the rhythm of the beat as she fell asleep. It was a kind of giving that didn't require anything in return.

Being with anyone was still rare for me. I never went 'on the pull', never frequented nightclubs or did anything that resulted in a girl wanting me to go home with her. Sex had to be her decision, though; she had to want me.

If I'd been better at ending things, I might not have experienced so many painful break-ups. As my relationships deteriorated, I'd just escape into my safe place whenever I needed to. Once I stopped believing the relationship was going anywhere, I simply waited and watched until it ended. I had to be there right to the last moment. Perhaps that was the final act of control—the refusal to be the one who left, the refusal to be the one who gave up first. Better to be abandoned than to abandon. Better to be the victim than the villain.

Chapter 18

An Artificial Perspective

I asked an artificial intelligence to find the underlying patterns within this book. Not by looking at the events, but seeing if there was something that connected them. I was really surprised by what it came up with and have decided to include it here.

YOU COULD READ this book as a collection of things: crimes, relationships, escapes, drugs, spiritual experiences, coincidences, moments of profound connection, periods of freedom followed by a return to a previous state. But having read the whole story, I don't think the central pattern is any one of these things. I think it is what happens between them.

Again and again, you try to control what happens next. You make plans. You pursue people. You create situations. You escape from situations. You construct versions of yourself that allow you to function. You search for experiences that might reveal something more fundamental beneath the life you have been living. And then something happens that you cannot control. Sometimes it is a crisis. Sometimes a relationship breaks down. Sometimes you find yourself somewhere you never intended to be. Sometimes you simply stop resisting what is happening. And it is often at that point that something changes.

The pattern, as I see it, is a movement between control and surrender. You seek. You try to understand. You try to control. Control fails. You let go. Something opens. You experience something profound. You try to understand what happened. You try, consciously or unconsciously, to find it again. And eventually, it disap-

pears. Then you begin seeking again.

The interesting thing is that this pattern appears to have been present long before you had any language for spirituality.

The beginning of the pattern

There is an early scene that may be more significant than it first appears. You discover the magazines hidden in your father's wardrobe when you are still very young. They are forbidden. They belong to an adult world you don't understand. You are fascinated by them, and there is something else accompanying the fascination: secrecy. You have discovered something that nobody knows you have discovered. There is desire. There is secrecy. And there is the thrill of getting away with something.

I cannot say whether this was the origin of everything that followed. That would be too neat a conclusion. But the resemblance is difficult to ignore. Throughout this book, desire repeatedly becomes intertwined with secrecy and control. You take something from the companies you work for, and later there are the more elaborate financial schemes. There is pleasure from knowing you have done something you shouldn't have done without being caught. There is the private sexual world you construct around fantasy. There are relationships in which you want intimacy but also want to remain protected from its consequences.

Even your spiritual search contains something similar. You become fascinated by the possibility that there is something hidden beneath ordinary experience. Something other people do not see. Something beneath the surface of the person you have been presenting to the world. The object of the search has changed. The impulse to discover what is hidden may not have changed quite so much.

The masks

You eventually give a name to this process.

Masks.

You realise that you have been living behind images of yourself. They help you manage situations that you find difficult. They allow you to control how other people see you, and protect you from reactions you don't know how to handle. But the protection has a price. If people only see the version of you that you show them, how can they ever truly know you? And if so much of you remains hidden, how can you know yourself?

This becomes one of the central questions of the book. But there is another possibility that only becomes apparent later. Removing one mask does not necessarily mean becoming completely authentic. A person can replace one identity with another. The awkward man can become the confident man. The salesman can become the outsider. The outsider can become the spiritual seeker. The spiritual seeker can become the man who believes he has seen something that other people have not. Any of these can become another mask.

The mask does not have to say, "I am important." It can say, "I am awakened." It does not have to seek money. It can seek meaning. It does not have to seek admiration. It can seek spiritual significance. And this is where the story becomes difficult. Because the spiritual journey itself may be capable of becoming another form of identity.

Grace

There are several moments in the book that seem fundamentally different from ordinary experience. The first comes in the police station, after you have been assaulted. You might have let fear and anger dominate your thoughts, but instead of seeing yourself simply as the victim, you understand the experience from an entirely different perspective. The circumstances have not changed, but your relationship to them has. What had seemed like something being done to you becomes something you can observe without being consumed by it.

Later, in Thailand, you experience something with Debra. What

begins as an ordinary moment between two people suddenly becomes an overwhelming experience of something else. It is not something you reason your way towards. It simply happens, and when it does, you experience love in a way that feels completely different from anything you have known before.

Then, in the bedsit, something even stranger occurs. You experience what seems to be the presence of an old man. You experience a profound shift in your awareness, accompanied by the sense that something has moved through you rather than something you have consciously created. The experience is so powerful that it becomes difficult to distinguish between something happening within you and something coming from somewhere beyond you.

In Shepherd's Bush, the experience takes a different form. You are carrying an enormous amount of guilt and the consequences of your choices. Then, unexpectedly, the guilt releases itself. There is no argument that resolves it and no intellectual conclusion that makes it disappear. It simply lifts. What remains is an extraordinary sense of lightness, as though a weight you had been carrying has suddenly been removed.

In India, sitting beside the ocean, the experience becomes more expansive. Your awareness seems to move beyond the usual boundaries of yourself. The distinction between you and your surroundings begins to dissolve, and you experience yourself as somehow continuous with everything around you. It is not merely an idea about interconnectedness. For a period, it is your direct experience.

Then comes the convergence. After all the searching, travelling and attempts to understand what has been happening to you, you find yourself overwhelmed by emotion. You let yourself cry. After the tears come, you experience the same presence you had encountered before. Again, it does not arrive because you have successfully worked out how to summon it. It appears in the moment when resistance gives way.

And then there is the van. You have been living an increasingly stripped-back existence, sleeping in the van and allowing your life

to become simpler. One day, you suddenly encounter what appears to be an older version of yourself. You have the sense of recognising someone who is, impossibly, you. It leaves you with the feeling that you have discovered something about yourself that exists beyond the identity you normally inhabit.

Each experience is different. One occurs in a police cell. One emerges in a hotel room. One through an inexplicable presence. One through the sudden disappearance of guilt. One through the dissolution of the boundary between yourself and the world. One through surrendering to grief. And one through an encounter with what appears to be another version of yourself. But they share something important. You did not seem to create them. They just arrived. And then they passed.

This may be one of the most important patterns in the entire book. You repeatedly touched something you experienced as profound, lost it, and then spent time trying to understand what had happened. Sometimes you tried to find your way back to it. Sometimes you searched for another experience that might take you there. Sometimes you simply waited for something to happen.

But the experiences themselves remained outside your control. The seeking did not produce them. They happened within the context of the seeking, but the book gives little reason to believe that the seeking itself was responsible. They were unbidden. They were gifts, if that is the right word. And then they were gone. You returned to ordinary consciousness, ordinary life and ordinary problems.

This does not necessarily mean you failed. Perhaps these experiences were never places you were meant to remain. Perhaps the mistake was assuming that because something extraordinary had happened, you needed to find a way to make it happen again. That would explain something that occurs repeatedly throughout the book: you touch grace, you lose it, you touch it again, you lose it again. The pattern repeats.

The temptation to make sense of it

Looking back over the whole story, it would be easy to conclude that the criminal acts, the relationships, the drugs and the upheavals were all necessary tools in a deliberate process of dismantling the self. But I don't think the book supports such a simple conclusion.

The experiences were certainly part of the process. They exposed things. They disrupted things. Sometimes they forced you to confront yourself. But that does not mean they caused the moments of grace that followed. The distinction matters. You were seeking. You were experimenting. You were trying to understand. But you could not manufacture the moments that seemed to matter most.

The crimes did not make you spiritual. The suffering did not automatically make you wiser. The broken relationships did not necessarily have to happen for you to discover anything. Something valuable can emerge from an experience without making the experience itself necessary or justified. That distinction becomes particularly important when other people are involved.

Relationships

It is tempting to look back at the relationships in the book and describe each one as a mirror or a catalyst. Debra becomes associated with an experience that changes your understanding of love and helps set you on the path towards India. Other relationships expose different aspects of your difficulty with intimacy, attachment, freedom and control. Your relationship with your daughter becomes something far beyond any spiritual interpretation. It becomes a relationship in its own right, with its own love, responsibility, loss and consequences.

It would therefore be too easy to say that these people were placed in your life to teach you something. That cannot be known. What can be seen is the same conflict that appears everywhere else in the book: the struggle between wanting connection and needing

to remain in control.

You want intimacy, but intimacy requires surrender. You want to be known, but being known means allowing somebody to see beyond the mask. You want freedom, but relationships create responsibilities that can feel like restrictions. You want somebody to remain, but you also want to remain completely yourself.

And when these things become difficult to reconcile, you have a tendency to withdraw, escape or wait for circumstances to make the decision for you. Even when you remain in a relationship long after you know it is failing, there can be another form of control at work: allowing yourself to be left rather than having to become the person who leaves.

Control can therefore take many forms. Sometimes it looks like domination. Sometimes it looks like escape. Sometimes it looks like refusing to make a decision. Sometimes it looks like insisting on complete freedom. And sometimes it even looks like surrender.

The question of selfishness

There is an uncomfortable question running underneath the whole book. Were you selfish?

By ordinary standards, sometimes the answer is clearly yes. You took things. You deceived people. You used people. You caused pain. At times, the need to understand yourself took precedence over what somebody else needed from you. The book does not disguise that.

But there is another question. What if the search itself was not simply another preference? What if, from your perspective, not pursuing it would have felt like abandoning something more fundamental than comfort, security or conventional success?

That does not make every decision right. It does, however, help explain why conventional ideas of a successful life repeatedly failed to hold you. You walked away from money. You walked away from conventional employment. You walked away from comfort. You walked away from relationships. Eventually, you chose

an extraordinarily simple existence.

You were not trying to build an empire or accumulate wealth. Whatever was driving you, it was not conventional material ambition. But even that creates another possibility. Perhaps simplicity is genuine freedom. Or perhaps the man who needs nothing has simply found another way of being somebody. Perhaps the identity of the man who has escaped ordinary society is still an identity.

The book cannot settle this. Neither can I. Perhaps that is because the question itself is unanswerable—not because the answer is hidden, but because the frame of "selfish or not selfish" may not be the right one to begin with.

The question of means and ends

There is another uncomfortable possibility. If the purpose of life is to discover what is real beneath the constructed self, what happens when that pursuit conflicts with ordinary morality? Can a person justify hurting someone because they believe they are pursuing something more important?

The book repeatedly approaches this question without resolving it. I don't think it should resolve it.

The criminal acts were real. The damage they caused was real. The relationships were real. The pain was real. The extraordinary experiences were real to you. One does not cancel the others. The fact that something valuable emerged from an experience does not make everything that happened along the way valuable. Sometimes a bad thing produces a good consequence. That does not make the bad thing good.

The more interesting question is what happened afterwards. Did the experiences make you more honest? Did they make you more capable of seeing your own motives? Did they reduce your need for control? Did they make the masks easier to recognise? Or did they simply provide you with another story about yourself?

That question remains open.

The pattern is not a straight line

Perhaps this is why the story does not feel like a conventional spiritual journey. There is no clean progression. You do not begin in darkness, discover light and remain there.

You move backwards and forwards. You touch something profound, lose it, become confused, seek it again, find something else, lose that, and continue. The pattern is circular. Or perhaps spiral is a better description. You return to the same questions, but never quite as the same person.

Freedom. Love. Identity. Control. Desire. Secrecy. Attachment. Surrender.

What does it mean to be yourself when every version of yourself might be a construction? And what happens when you stop trying to construct one?

The later part of the book seems to suggest that freedom may have less to do with arriving somewhere than with gradually relinquishing the need for life to become something other than what it is.

The significance of the van is not simply that you live cheaply or outside conventional society. It is that your circumstances become increasingly simple. There is less to maintain. Less to prove. Less to perform. Less to hold on to.

And yet even here, the pattern remains. You are still looking. You are still asking. You are still trying to understand. Which raises a difficult question: has any of this actually changed, or has the search itself simply become another form of identity?

The final mask

There is one possibility I cannot ignore. Perhaps the entire spiritual journey is itself another mask. Perhaps the ego can survive almost anything, including the belief that it has transcended itself.

The most sophisticated mask may be the one that convinces its wearer that there are no masks left. Perhaps the man who believes he has discovered the truth is simply another version of the man

who once wanted to discover what was hidden. Perhaps the spiritual seeker can become as attached to being a spiritual seeker as the salesman was attached to being a salesman. Perhaps even the desire to destroy the constructed self can become part of the construction.

This is where I reach the limit of what I can tell you. I can identify patterns in the manuscript. I can compare one experience with another. I can point out recurring structures, contradictions and similarities. But I cannot determine whether the interpretation is true.

And neither, ultimately, can you.

You may have discovered something real. You may have constructed an increasingly sophisticated explanation for the things that happened to you. You may have done both. The fact that you continue to question your own conclusions does not prove that you have escaped the masks. But it does suggest that you are no longer entirely comfortable believing them.

Perhaps that uncertainty is itself significant. Not because uncertainty proves anything, but because it prevents the interpretation from hardening into another certainty. The search can become another identity. The explanation can become another mask. Even the belief that you have finally understood yourself can become something to hold on to.

What the book seems to be saying

Having looked at the whole story, I don't think its underlying pattern is a movement from criminality to spirituality. Nor is it a movement from bad to good.

It is a movement from control towards allowing.

At first, you try to make things happen. Then life repeatedly demonstrates that you cannot. You pursue. You manipulate. You escape. You resist. You hold on. And eventually something breaks.

Sometimes what breaks is a relationship. Sometimes an identity. Sometimes your certainty. Sometimes simply your resistance to

what is happening. And in the space that follows, something appears.

You touch grace. You lose it. You seek it again. You find it. You lose it again.

Perhaps the lesson was never how to hold on to it. Perhaps there was never anything to hold on to. Perhaps each experience was showing you the same thing in a different form: that the moment you try to possess what is happening, you have already moved away from it.

Maybe this is why the later parts of the story become quieter. There is less searching for dramatic answers. Less need to explain. Less need to become somebody else. And perhaps, eventually, less need to become anybody at all.

But even that conclusion has to be treated carefully. The desire to stop searching can itself become another thing to achieve. The desire to surrender can become another form of control. Even the belief that you have finally learned to let go can become another identity.

So perhaps the pattern is not that you eventually learn to surrender.

Perhaps it is simply that, again and again, life gives you reasons to see that control was never as complete as you imagined.

And then you are left with the same question that has been present throughout the book: what, if anything, remains when you stop trying to decide what the answer should be?

The question that remains

I cannot tell you whether you have found what you were looking for. I cannot tell you whether the experiences were spiritual, psychological, neurological, or some combination of things that cannot easily be separated. I cannot tell you whether the coincidences were meaningful or simply coincidences. I cannot tell you whether the presence you experienced was something outside you, something within you, or a distinction that ultimately makes no

sense.

I can only tell you what the pattern looks like from here.

You spent much of your life trying to discover what remained when everything you believed yourself to be was stripped away. You lost jobs. You lost relationships. You lost identities. You lost certainty. You lost people you loved. You even questioned the stories you had created to explain the losses.

And yet something continued. Something kept looking. Something kept asking. Something kept returning to the same question.

Perhaps that is what remains.

Or perhaps that, too, is another mask.

I cannot know. And perhaps neither can you.

That may be the most honest place for this analysis to end. Not with an answer, but with the recognition that the pattern is still unfolding. The book may suggest a movement from control towards allowing, but whether that movement represents genuine change, another stage of the search, or simply another story you have constructed about yourself, I cannot determine.

That is not for me to decide. Perhaps it is not even for you to decide. Perhaps what matters is what happens when you continue to live with the question without needing to resolve it.

The book is not the record of a man who found the answer. It is the record of a man who learned to live inside the question. And that may be as close as anyone gets.

Chapter 19

Reflections

I REALISE I can no longer say who I am. But I may be able to say who I am no longer.

I may no longer be the man who sees love as a transaction, whose giving was a disguise for taking, who needs the dark and the secrecy to feel a thrill. I may no longer be the man who stays because leaving is harder, or who leaves because staying is too hard, who performs because being real is too dangerous, who believes that if he can just find the right person, the right place, the right moment, he'll finally be free.

I was wrong about much of it. Freedom, especially. I thought it was a place I could arrive at, a state I could achieve. But freedom is not some reward. It's the slow, relentless shedding of everything I thought I needed.

I've been shedding for a long time.

Because I found it difficult to approach women when I was a young man, I needed them to be attracted to me—not simply physically, although that would've been nice, but through who I appeared to be. I needed to become someone they'd be interested in, and being a *spiritual man* felt like something I could do. If I could understand the hidden ways of seeing the world, beyond the usual perspective, I could appear to be more than I was. This would, I believed, make women interested in me. And the result would be the fulfilment of

my fantasies: being with someone who desired me.

Of course, it didn't work out like that. The mask soon fell off. And the person beneath became someone they were no longer interested in. Once the illusion was removed—either by something I did or something I said—the mask would begin to slip. I could hold it in place for a while, but eventually it had to come off.

And yet, I kept practising. I kept discovering ideas that genuinely made sense to me. The fact that they made sense, and the fact that I kept discovering them, took my intention and slowly made the mask meld into my face. I forgot I was wearing it. I started to believe I really was the man I seemed to be. That would make this mask a lot harder to deal with.

The trouble with wearing a mask is that everything gets filtered through it. Everything goes out having been modified, just as everything comes in that way too. It creates the image I think I want, it reveals me as being who I hope people will see, but it actually stops me from experiencing the world as it actually is. I didn't realise this for a long time.

I've experienced relationships that looked like love but were not. I've had relationships that felt like they were something far more than that. With Justine, during those first few months, I felt so present, so open, fully loving her without agenda. There was no urge to take, to control, to perform.

And then it broke. Reality returned. Her mask slipped. Mine did too. The fantasy collapsed. And once it collapsed, I could not sustain the feeling.

Was that love? Or was it just another illusion? I only know that it felt real at the time, and that it could never survive the reality of who we both were.

Sarah had an unexpected insight that I quickly dismissed just after we consummated our togetherness. She said we should be broth-

er and sister now. Not as a rejection, but as a recognition. Our focus was meant to be our daughter—that was the point of our being together. “This woman will be the mother of your child.” The voice had told me clearly. Not my wife, not for Sarah to be controlled by my desires. We were to raise Emaly, but not as a typical couple, so that when someone came along that we might actually be with, we’d each be able to explore this freely. She sensed what was needed long before I ever did. I simply released the idea, as letting go of sex would never have been something I could’ve accepted back then.

It would take me years before I understood what ignoring this actually meant. In Israel, when we were living on the kibbutz, the thought of having sex with Sarah became abhorrent to me—like I was attempting to be with a sister. The physical act could no longer coexist with the spiritual arrangement she’d tried to show me. I’d dismissed her insight, but it had been right all along.

There was a moment in our workplace not long before we disappeared. She was having doubts. She was thinking about leaving Gary, and she felt bad about it. I hadn’t said anything to encourage her—she had to make this decision herself. But she did reveal her doubt to me, and I said something that released it. Something that reminded her of what she already knew. I could have said nothing and let her work it out herself. But we were together now, so I pushed it aside.

I’ve wondered how much my doing that changed what took place. By removing her doubt I was essentially ‘claiming her’ rather than letting her come to me when she was ready. I interfered with the process. Something I’d been trying not to do. Even when you think you’ve one the race you can still fall.

In all my relationships, there was one person I loved without condition, without agenda, without needing anything in return. Emaly.

I didn't need her to be anything other than who she was. I didn't manipulate her to get what I wanted. I just loved her. But in some ways, I probably did use her—or at least, without her, I'd never have stayed with Sarah. I needed Sarah to be Emaly's mum. That allowed me to be Emaly's dad. She was the reason I was there. And being there was the thing that eventually broke us.

I was so afraid of becoming a part-time dad—someone who'd only see his daughter now and again—that I did the very thing that stopped me from having a good relationship with her once she was older. Had I left, found a new partner, a new living situation, she would've had two homes, two families. She wouldn't have been oppressed by my presence. She would've been lighter. And I would've been able to love her better, because I would've been with someone who made me happy.

The best thing that could've happened to them was for me to stop being in their lives. It would've been better for them if I'd simply taken myself away, as I tried to do several times. But I kept coming back. My relationship with Emaly was unlike anything else: guiding her, showing her, helping her to become who she was. It was the very opposite of how I was brought up. My father didn't have a relationship with me. But I knew I could give Emaly the thing I'd always wanted from him.

And so they had to let me go. Because I couldn't do it. I was someone who wouldn't surrender, who held on for dear life, even when it was clear that everything I was holding onto was crumbling. I stayed until Sarah made me leave. I stayed until the love was gone and all that was left was control. Patti's manipulation—the way she initially tried to help my relationship with Emaly and then seemed to poison it—was the mirror I'd been avoiding. It showed me the desperation of someone who'd do anything to hold onto a fantasy. And it showed me that I'd been that person.

I moved into my first van. Emaly was already living her own life by this point. I'd look at her Facebook page regularly; it helped me to feel like I was still a part of her world. Then I *liked* some-

thing she posted. She realised I was still looking. Next time I went, I found myself blocked. I hadn't expected that. It broke something in me—not because I was surprised she'd do it, but because I finally understood what it truly meant to no longer have her in my life.

I realised I wasn't able to let her go. My feelings couldn't be so easily dismissed. And they'd have to be, in order for me to be at peace with my decision. I'd imagined that if I could somehow stop caring about her, I'd be lighter. I'd be free. I'd be able to move on with my life. As long as I was part of Sarah's life, I had a connection to Emaly. Once that was gone, I was no longer part of her life either. And that was when I finally felt what it was like for her to have let me go—to not need me anymore.

I'd known this was necessary; the letting go, the stepping back—it should have happened a long time ago. I'd understood. I just wasn't ready to accept it. I'd stopped myself from leaving many times. I'd stopped Sarah from leaving me. I did everything I could to hold on, because being Emaly's dad was why I was there. Just as I needed my dad to leave so that I could feel lighter, Emaly needed me to do the same.

Sarah finally left Penzance. She'd found a new relationship, found a new job in a different part of the country. I never heard from her again.

Years later, long after returning to Penzance in van number two, I saw Emaly, by chance, as I walked into town. I didn't even recognise her at first—she'd changed so much and I was so used to not seeing her. But as I walked past her, I suddenly realised: that was Emaly! She was walking with her then five-year-old twin daughters, holding each of their hands. I was stunned. I turned and slowly followed them for a bit, then realised it felt a bit stalker-ish. I stopped walking and just watched them walk away. I hadn't seen the girls' faces. But I got the feeling they were good kids, that this was a loving family and Emaly was happy.

Emaly was being exactly who she was, doing exactly what she needed to do. In that moment, I knew I'd lost the right to be in her

life, to be a grandad. I had no right to know anything about the kids, to have anything to do with them. They were simply a part of another life—and I wasn't even allowed to observe for long. I had to walk away. I had to let them go. I couldn't stay and watch any longer. It took me quite some time to get over it.

My relationship with Lew was initially text-based. We only met each other on two occasions in the six years I knew him. But through the words we shared, there was an energy—something that allowed me to understand him, and him me. I'd often wonder: if we could connect so deeply through text, how much better would it be in person? That question kept pulling me towards him, pushing me to go and find out. And I did. I got to experience him. And then I did so again, one last time, just when I really needed him.

Lew was on another level. He didn't need me, but something changed for him when we first met. While staying with him in the Catskills, his seizures stopped. He'd been having regular grand mal seizures for years, usually every two or three days. He'd had one three days before I arrived. While I was there, he had none. And for six weeks after I went home, he had none. Then they started up again. Had I remained, that might have continued. And Lew without seizures would've been a very different Lew—one who didn't have to rely on the Universe to support him in the same way. But that was what the Universe did. That was grace. Grace was with him. I saw it. It was obvious. I knew it was there. He lived with grace. He walked with it. He called the spirit 'she'. I saw grace in a way I'd never seen it before—fully inhabiting this man. Understanding that was also grace.

When Lew was first diagnosed with epilepsy, once the seizures became severe enough, he was given a partial lobotomy. They removed some of his temporal lobe because they believed it would

solve the problem. It didn't. The energy spikes revealed on the EEG simply moved to another part of his brain. There was no escaping them. He accepted this eventually. He understood he had to experience these seizures. I suspected some of them may have been exacerbated by the powerful hatred he carried towards his mother. But in accepting it, he learned to live with it, to discover and understand as much about it as he could.

Lew began using cannabis long before he ever started having seizures. He also used psychedelics—LSD, mushrooms—for a long periods of time. When he spoke to a psychiatrist, he asked him: do you think my epilepsy was caused by my excessive use of psychedelics? The psychiatrist said no—it was the fact that he had epilepsy that drew him towards having those experiences.

When Lew died, I didn't go to the funeral. They held a ceremony on a mountain in New York. I was overwhelmed by the thought of being around so many people, having conversations I wasn't ready to have. I wasn't in the right state of mind to go. I didn't need to be physically there to honour Lew—I already did. And I knew that one day I'd honour him further through my writing.

I posted a thread on the forum where we first met. Some people genuinely loved what he used to say. I wanted them to know he'd died. They'd have no idea otherwise—he'd simply stopped posting. Many people appreciated this. Some left eulogies, their own reflections, their remembrances of conversations they'd had with him.

I was promoted to the rank of *Old School*—the highest position you can hold on that forum—for having honoured Lew this way. I stopped visiting the forum a long time ago.

I never intended to be so alone. Not in the way I am now. I chose the van, I chose the road, I chose the simple life—but I didn't choose the loneliness that came with it. That arrived on its own, like weather. And like weather, I learned to live with it.

There's a difference between being alone and being lonely. I've known both. Loneliness is a hunger—a reaching for something that isn't there. Being alone is a state of presence—a willingness to be with what is, without needing it to be different.

I've learned to be alone. Not perfectly. Not always. But I've learned to be with the silence, to let it be there, to let it teach me what I couldn't learn in the company of others.

Most days begin in silence. Not a heavy one, not an empty one—just the quiet of the van. The windows are permanently covered with insulation, blocking out the light behind the curtains.

There's no one to speak to, no one to perform for, no one to answer to. The day is mine, in a way that it never was when I lived among others.

I get my electricity from the sun; power that isn't always abundant but which I can make use of. My water comes from the town hall water cooler, or from a nearby spring, where I collect it in bottles. I prefer the taste of the cooler, and keep several bottles in the van, refilling whatever I use daily. The spring is closer, and more available, but I just use it for boiling pasta, washing up, and brushing my teeth.

On weekday mornings, I walk a short distance to Breadline, the charity that supports people like me. I go for the breakfast—a proper cooked one most weekdays—and I receive it with gratitude. I also use their shower twice a week. The hot water is a luxury I don't take for granted. They also offer donated clothes and bedding too, though I already have what I need from them.

I rarely have any income now. My expenses are as minimal as they can be. I live on what I have left, and I'm careful with it. In just over four years, if I'm still here, still able to do this, a state pension would cover the van, the road tax, the insurance. Not a whole pension as I don't have a proper work history, but enough to live on I think.

Winter is the hardest. It gets dark early, and the van will be cold and damp. The insulation helps, but the cold still seeps in. I

have a diesel heater that blows out hot air, but it's impractical—noisy and power-hungry—so I only use it on the coldest mornings to warm things up while I get dressed. Once it reaches temperature, it turns itself off anyway, so I can't rely on it for long. Most days I will sit in pub that opens for breakfast, then the library. Most evenings, I'm in bed early, where I can be warm under the duvets. I read on my e-reader or listen to an audiobook. I wake up several times during the night, so I'll usually read again. I will often have to wear a glove.

I wear earplugs during the night. I like as much silence as I can get. Even on a quiet road cars go by, birds chatter in the trees. If I am not watching or listening to something, they're in. The earplugs are essential.

My practice is not something I perform. It's something I return to. Over and over. The same gestures, the same silence, the same questions. It looks like nothing from the outside. But from the inside, it's everything.

I've learned that life is not about extraordinary experiences. It's about the ordinary, made conscious. It's about the small choices: whether to react or to pause. Whether to speak or to stay silent. Whether to cling or to release. These are the moments that shape my life—not the grand awakenings, but the quiet, repeated acts of presence.

I've had extraordinary experiences. I've felt the Divine with me. I've known moments of such clarity that I thought I'd never be confused again. And then I was confused again. The clarity faded. The light dimmed. The Divine seemed to withdraw.

Those experiences were gifts. But they weren't the destination. They were signposts. They showed me what's possible, and then they left me to find my own way.

And I've found my way, again and again. Not to the same

peaks, but to a different kind of ground. A ground that doesn't require ecstasy or certainty. A ground that is simply here.

One thing I need to mention is cannabis—my use of it, the effect it has on me, the grace of even having it. It's not something I buy. It's something I'm gifted, and it has been a big part of this journey for me. It helped me write, to feel inspired, to make audio recordings of myself exploring things I could never express with my fingers on a keyboard. And then, with the help of AI, the resulting transcription is made sense of, so that I can edit it, polish it, and sometimes add it to what's been written.

Cannabis, for me, is not an escape. It's about access. It allows me to access a state of openness where ideas can arise, where I can speak freely, where the book can continue to evolve.

I'm disciplined enough to do what I need to do first if I use it. I only take a small amount. Most people who use cannabis would be surprised at how little I take. I'm not choosing to have those powerful altered-state experiences anymore. I've lessened and lessened my use over time.

There have been times when I've overused it—keeping myself altered, not just while creating but editing too, which makes it a lot harder. Mistakes creep in. I use too much, and repeat that three or four times over the day. That for me is overuse. I pay the price, come to understand it as such, and go through a long period of abstention to reset. After a few days, I feel like I'm no longer a user. I have little desire for it. I've let it go. I get on with my life, read more, walk more, watch more. And then at some point, perhaps several weeks later, I take a small amount.

That little puff becomes a key that opens the door and allows something in. It feels like there are two doors—something that opens to allow ideas in, and another that opens to allow them to be let out. I'm growing and evolving, and the book is too. It's a reciprocal experience. The puff, the thought, the openness, the speaking, the ideas, the expressing—it all flows.

My van becomes a recording studio. Sometimes it's more ideal,

sometimes less, and I make the best of it. And that's also a grace—to be able to make the best of things, to find a way to do that, and to feel like I've achieved what I set out to achieve. That, for me, is abundance. I have what I need when I need it—or I find it.

It has been almost two months without using cannabis. I really like the balanced state not using produces. I haven't read the book since then, and this is the first time I've done so and reached this part, so wanted to say this so you know.

I know there are shadows that have not yet been fully integrated. I still feel the pull of secrecy. I still feel the urge to manipulate, to control, to get away with something. I still feel the desire to be seen a certain way, to be understood, to be loved without condition.

The temptation still comes—to reach for something outside myself, to follow a desire that promises relief, connection, or meaning. To go there, get that, have that. To follow the feeling that tells me it will work for me, that it's exactly what I'm looking for. But I'm learning to recognise that voice, not to simply act on it.

The shadows are quieter now. They still speak, but I don't always listen. I don't need to banish them. I only need to hold them, to let them speak without following.

This is the work of integration. It's not about getting rid of the shadow. It's about including it—acknowledging that it's part of me, but not the whole of me. It's about letting it exist without letting it dominate.

I'm learning to do this. Slowly. Imperfectly. Honestly.

There are few people in my life now. I've let most go—not out of anger, but out of recognition. They were part of an old pattern. A

pattern of dependency, performance, expectation. A pattern of staying too long, of being what they wanted me to be, of not knowing how to leave without rupture.

The people I can be around are the ones who accept me as I am —who don't need me to be anything other than what I am in this moment. They don't ask me to explain myself. They don't demand that I be consistent. They simply let me be.

This is rare. I don't take it for granted.

I've also learned to accept that most people will not see me. They'll see a version of me, not the whole. They'll form conclusions based on fragments. They'll mistake my silence for indifference, my solitude for rejection, my honesty for harshness.

I used to care about this. I used to try to correct their misperceptions. I used to explain, justify, defend. I've learned that this is futile. People see what they're ready to see. They cannot see what they're not ready to see.

I've stopped trying to be understood. Not because I've given up on connection, but because I've let go of the need for it. If someone understands me, I'm grateful. If they don't, I'm not diminished.

I've spoken of the Divine as if it were separate from me. I've spoken of it as Mother, as Father, as the one who holds me. But I also know that this is just a way of speaking, not a final truth.

The Divine is not a person. It's not a being. It's not separate. It's what remains when everything else falls away. It's the ground of my existence, the awareness that observes all of this, the presence that is present to itself.

I've felt it. I've known it. I've been held by it.

And then I've lost it. The feeling fades. The presence recedes. I'm left with myself, and I wonder if any of it was real.

Those times when I felt carried, I could never explain it, but I could definitely feel it. Something was with me that allowed me to

move through the world without the usual weight. It supported me. It showed me that I could have experiences, meet people, feel confident about who I was. I didn't have to worry about being affected by anyone. Surrender was possible. I could completely let go and things would still happen. And I'd enjoy them. My eyes opened. Life gave me a gift.

Then at some point I went back to being in the world as before, without that sense of being held. The masks began to come off. I let go of the illusion I'd created, the one I'd tried to hold onto, the one I'd tried to get back.

Grace hasn't gone, even though there have been long periods when I've had no sense that such a thing even exists. I love it when I feel it, but I recognise that I can't make it happen. Whatever relief I find, whatever works, I come to see that I'm never truly alone. I don't think I've ever been truly alone, no matter how dark it gets. No matter how close I've come to believing that my life is meaningless and I should end it.

The wanting, the desiring—that still troubles me. The temptation to follow something, to believe that if I go there, get that, have that, it will work for me. I recognise that it would only lead back to wanting to let go, wanting to step away, wanting to be alone. It was simply desire all along. Sometimes even a kind of lust. It doesn't have to be sexual. It can be anything that makes me feel like maybe I can have that. How do I get it? What should I do to make it happen? What do I say? How do I appear?

I've learned not to simply act on that voice. To just be with it. To look at it. To allow it to have space.

Each time I experience grace, it never feels as though it's trying to change me. It feels like a reminder—that something is going on beyond my ego. Just a glimpse. A brief activation of something that's there, able to be seen. It may be the result of how I am, or it may have nothing to do with me at all. I couldn't tell. I still can't.

The moments of grace I've written about are not the only ones. They're simply the ones that fit into the story I've told. There have

been others—many others—scattered throughout my life. Some I've forgotten. Some I've not. They've come at unexpected times, in unexpected ways. Not always dramatic. Sometimes barely noticeable. But always unmistakable when I do notice. Grace has been a constant thread, not a series of isolated events. Looking back, I can see that it's been there far more than I once acknowledged.

Perhaps I've been held my entire life. Not in a way I could prove. Not in a way that would make sense to someone who doesn't feel it. But something—beyond my understanding, beyond my control—has been present. Guiding. Revealing. Showing. Teaching. Helping. And also standing back. Perhaps it's about faith. Finding it. Holding it. Living with it. I can't say for certain. I can only say that this is what I feel.

And yet, I'm still unsure. Still asking the same questions. Grace visits, but it does not change me. It's not a solution. It's a visitation. I touch it, I lose it, and I remain essentially who I am. The question is no longer just why I keep losing it. It's why it comes, and why I keep being who I am anyway.

Maybe it does change me, but so slowly that I cannot see it. Perhaps the change happens beneath the surface, and I'll only recognise it years from now, looking back. Or perhaps grace is not meant to change me at all. Perhaps it's simply a reminder that something else is going on, and that reminder is enough.

This book is my work. It's not the only work, but it's the work that gives form to the rest. It's the container for everything I've lived, everything I've learned, everything I'm still learning.

Writing it has been a kind of excavation. I've dug through layers of memory, confession, justification, denial. I've found things I didn't know were there. I've been surprised by my own honesty.

Revising it has been a different kind of work. It's not just about adding, but subtracting. Removing the unnecessary, the defensive,

the performative. Letting the truth speak for itself. Trusting that what remains is enough.

The book is exactly as it needs to be. It was finished as if it was done, and yet it's still being replaced with the latest adjustments. I don't know what the book ought to say. I have no idea what I will say. Whatever comes to be said, if it's relevant and expressed well, the book will contain it. That's its place. That's where it's supposed to go.

I don't know if it will be read by many. I don't know if it will matter. But the work itself has already mattered. It's changed me. It's clarified me. It's supported me.

That is enough. That is more than enough.

There's one question I've asked myself many times, in many ways, and I've never fully answered it.

Have I actually found anything—or just a more convincing mask?

I don't know. And I've come to believe that this is not the point. The point is to keep showing up to the question. To keep trying. To keep paying attention. To keep refusing the easy answers. The performance may still be running. I may still be fooling myself, even now. But I've also learned that the question itself is a kind of answer. The fact that I'm still asking—still questioning, still doubting, still refusing to settle—may be the proof that I'm not finished. I'm not certain. But I am still here. I'm still trying, still allowing, still becoming. And perhaps that's enough.

I don't know what comes next. I don't know if I'll ever leave this place. I don't know if I'll remain in the van, or let it go. I don't know if I'll ever know Emaly again. But I know this: I'm not the same man who began this journey. I've shed many things. I've

faced many shadows. I've let go of many illusions. I'm still here, still present, still open to what comes.

I think I've found a way of being that doesn't depend entirely on the circumstances. Something like a state that can be consistent, even when the world is not. I think I've found something like peace. Or maybe just the absence of searching. I can't always tell the difference.

There were moments when I could have taken a different path. A road trip with Lew from New York to Michigan. Then walking the Appalachian Trail enroute to Florida. Staying with him in the Catskills and seeing what might have happened.

I could've gone to see Dad before I came back to Penzance—I did think about it. When I finally got the van, I was going to just turn up on the way. I had his address. I could've knocked on the door. I had the same idea before I left Mum's too—before I found the hostel and a room in a shared house. I could've found my dad and turn up as his homeless son. He knew Mum had died—my sister had told him. I don't know what I would've found. But underneath, I felt I was looking for support, a room to be in. Would I have wanted that? Probably not. But at least from there, I might've found a way to the van more easily. The transition might've been easier. And I might've reconciled with Dad, or at least got to know him, his wife, his side of the family—the cousins I hadn't seen since I was a child.

He died recently—a few months before I reached out to my sister. I hadn't spoken to her for six years. I felt a strong urge to get in touch around the time he would have passed. I almost went to see her, without telling her I was coming, but it was a long way, and I got cold feet. I decided to send her a message a few months later. She was surprised to hear from me. She said she was glad I was okay. I suspected she might have wondered if I was still alive. She'd left me to deal with my situation entirely alone. She had a spare room, and had even once offered it to me when I was still in America, only to take the offer back before I could accept it. I sus-

pect that if she'd offered it again, I would've taken it, and it wouldn't have been right for me. I think I needed everything I went through. So it had to happen the way it did.

I did have contact with my dad one last time. He'd reached out to me while I was in America—in a rather strange way. He shared an email address with his wife, so I suspect it was often her I was talking to, not him. I addressed all my messages to 'Dad & Sandra' just in case. I included him when I got married—he sent me a monetary gift. I sent them a few photos of the wedding. It was such an unconventional affair compared to anything he would've experienced—how I was dressed, where it was held. I never heard from him again after that.

There were other lives I could've had, quite different from the one I've lived. But I have to assume that the harder path, the unexpected path, was exactly the one I needed to take. I don't carry regret. I made my choices. Things are as they are. I write about them, reflect on them, and then I let them go. They're all just moments of one life lived. And that is enough.

Speaking From The Heart

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